

A REVIEW

OF

MR. WILBERFORCE'S TREATISE, &c.

WILLIAM

MR. WILLIAM B. BROWN

A REVIEW

OF

MR. WILBERFORCE'S TREATISE,

ENTITLED

"A PRACTICAL VIEW OF THE PREVAILING
RELIGIOUS SYSTEM OF PROFESSED
CHRISTIANS," ETC.

IN LETTERS TO A LADY.

By THOMAS BELSHAM.

Left your minds should be 'corrupted from the simplicity that is in
Christ. PAUL.

Christianity can never have its free course among men of improved
understandings, and even among rational creatures in general, while
gross misrepresentations of it are substituted in the place of the
simple and perfect Original. Archbishop NEWCOME.

L O N D O N:

PRINTED BY J. DAVIS, CHANCERY-LANE,

FOR J. JOHNSON, NO. 72, ST. PAUL'S
CHURCH-YARD.

1800.

A. B. C. D. E. F. G. H. I. J. K. L. M. N. O. P. Q. R. S. T. U. V. W. X. Y. Z.

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A REVIEW

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MR. WILBERFORCE'S TREATISE, &c.

LETTER I.

Mr. Wilberforce's System stated.

MADAM,

THE task you were pleased to assign me, of making some remarks upon Mr. Wilberforce's late publication, entitled, A Practical View of the prevailing religious System of professed Christians, &c. though undertaken with some reluctance, has, in the execution, been productive of a considerable degree of pleasure and advantage. It has induced me to review, and to compare with greater attention than I should otherwise have done, the religious system which Mr. Wilberforce maintains, and which was by education my own, with that which I have embraced upon rational conviction in consequence of serious enquiry; the result of which comparison has been a growing satisfaction in the latter, both

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with regard to its speculative truth, and its practical superiority.

Mr. Wilberforce is pleased to dignify the principles which he defends, or rather assumes, throughout his work, with the high epithet of "the peculiar doctrines of the gospel," p. 69, and hardly allows the name of christian to those who call in question his unproved dogmas concerning what he styles, p. 320, "the corruption of human nature, the atonement of the Saviour, and the sanctifying influence of the holy spirit." But as in the present inquisitive and enlightened age confident assertions no longer pass for self-evident truths, I shall take the liberty of examining freely into the merits of these opinions which so unworthily usurp the name of gospel doctrines, almost to the exclusion, certainly to the neglect of the genuine doctrine of Christ; and I hope to prove to your satisfaction, that, so far from making good their claims, they are inconsistent with reason, unfounded in scripture, and injurious to morality.

It is not easy to make out from Mr. Wilberforce's book the precise nature of the peculiar doctrines, the belief of which is represented as essential to the character of a christian. As Mr. Wilberforce makes light of the science of metaphysics *, which teaches us to think justly, and to express ourselves accurately upon intellectual subjects, it is not sur-

* Practical View, p. 102.

prising that he has neglected to give a definition or a clear explanation of the doctrines which he so strongly inculcates, and that he has left his readers to collect them as they are able, from hints incidentally thrown out in different parts of his work. Indeed I strongly suspect that his own ideas of these vaunted doctrines are very obscure and confused; and that he would find it difficult to express in intelligible language the system which he affirms it to be necessary that all should believe.

Upon the subject of what he calls the corruption of human nature, Mr. Wilberforce is indeed sufficiently explicit. "Man" (says he, p. 26,) "is an apostate creature—tainted with sin, not slightly and superficially, but radically, and to the very core." This it seems is Mr. Wilberforce's idea of the state in which the Creator of the world places and leaves the great mass of his human offspring,—and the evidence of this fact he represents as so "irresistibly strong, that none but the *obstinately dull*, (p. 51) can fail to discern its force." And as if it were not sufficient for men to be "naturally in a state in which they are unable to will or to do rightly," he further teaches us, that in this helpless state we are left by our Creator "to contend with an evil spirit, (p. 42) whose domination is so general as to entitle him to the denomination of the prince of this world."

Mr. Wilberforce makes no hesitation in consigning to eternal misery all those who fail in this unequal contest, that is, the great majority of the human race, and even of professed christians; all indeed who are not extricated from this wretched and helpless state by the supernatural aid of the holy spirit. "This indeed," he says, (p. 50,) "is offered to us, and we are furnished with every help;" but these offers are of no use unless to insult and aggravate our misery, since we are "naturally unable even to will what is right;" and therefore unable to accept or desire any assistance or deliverance. "Of ourselves," we are told, p. 113, "we can do nothing, we are by nature children of wrath, and under the power of the evil spirit. It is the influence of the holy spirit which *originally* awakens us from slumber, and quickens us when dead." Language has no meaning if Mr. Wilberforce's words do not express the dreadful doctrine that the Creator of the universe has placed the majority of his human offspring in circumstances the inevitable consequence of which is their eternal misery, for want of those influences of the holy spirit which they cannot solicit or desire, and which he will not otherwise impart. Such are the strange opinions which Mr. Wilberforce presumes to call the peculiar doctrines of the gospel, the belief of which is essential to the character of a christian,

christian, and which he represents, p. 330, "as
"warming the hearts of the people of God on
"earth with continual admiration, and thankful-
"ness, and love, and joy, and as calling forth
"afresh in heaven the ardent effusions of their in-
"exhausted gratitude."

Upon the subject of the atonement, which, together with the corruption of human nature, and the influences of the holy spirit, constitutes Mr. Wilberforce's system of peculiar doctrines, as this gentleman has declined to explain his ideas, it is impossible to know what hypothesis he means to patronise. There are three explanations of the doctrine, one or other of which is usually adopted by persons who chuse to annex ideas to the language they use. The first is the Calvinistic scheme, which teaches that Christ, being equal with the Father, suffered either in the garden, on the cross, or in hell, in quantity or in value, all that the elect would have suffered if they had not been so redeemed. Divine justice required its victim either in the sinner or his substitute: Jesus became the surety; he paid the debt and satisfied the demand. The second may be called the Arminian scheme: it supposes that the sufferings of Jesus were inconceivably severe, and that the object of them was to exhibit the evil and demerit of sin, and the displeasure of God against it, who would not forgive even a sincere penitent without thus manifesting his

hatred of wickedness. This I conceive to be what is now called the moderate doctrine. The third hypothesis is that of the learned Dr. John Taylor *, who supposes that the scriptures represent the death of Jesus as an act of obedience so acceptable to God, that, as the reward of it, he raises all mankind from the grave, and places them in circumstances of moral advantage equal to that of Adam antecedent to the fall. Whether Mr. Wilberforce embraces any one of these hypotheses, or has any other of his own, or whether he uses his words vaguely and without any settled meaning, does not appear. He contents himself with general expressions, such, for instance, as "that christianity is a scheme for justifying the ungodly by Christ's dying for them when yet sinners," (p. 121) a proposition to which no doubt all christians will give a verbal assent, though their ideas may be widely dissonant from each other. He afterwards dilates upon "the benefits of Christ's satisfaction," p. 123; "upon the deep feeling of gratitude for the merits and intercession of Christ, to which we are wholly indebted for our reconciliation to God, and for the will and power from first to last of working out our salvation," ib. He recommends "exhorting men to throw themselves with deep prostration of soul at the foot of the cross," p. 124; and insists on "dependence upon our blessed Sa-

* Key to the Romans.

"viour as the alone meritorious cause of our acceptance with God," p. 127.

As far therefore as I am able to collect Mr. Wilberforce's opinion, it seems to be, that the Creator doth not extricate any of his creatures from the wretched condition in which he places them by nature, out of pure disinterested benevolence, but out of regard to the transcendent merit of another divine Being, who by his sufferings made satisfaction to the Creator; to whom therefore, as Mr. Wilberforce justly observes, we are *wholly* indebted for our reconciliation with God.

You will not think, Madam, that I have undertaken a very difficult task in professing to point out the inconsistency of such extravagant opinions with sound reason, with genuine christianity, and with good morals.

I am, Madam, &c.

LETTER II.

Remarks on Mr. Wilberforce's System. View of rational Religion.

MADAM,

THOUGH it was my design in the preceding letter to exhibit an exact, and not a caricature

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portrait

portrait of Mr. Wilberforce's system, and though I have faithfully and closely copied from his original, I strongly suspect that this gentleman, if he should cast his eye upon it, would deny the resemblance, and would think it impossible that he should patronise a theory, the prominent features of which are so odious and disgusting. The truth is, that Mr. Wilberforce and others who agree with him seldom regard their system in a comprehensive view, or pursue their principles to their just and necessary consequences. Satisfied with being themselves in the number of the elect and regenerate, they see no cause to complain on their own account; and giving themselves up to joy and gratitude for their personal interest in the promises of the gospel, they feel comparatively little concern for the non-elect mass of mankind, doomed by the necessity of their circumstances to eternal misery; and seldom allow themselves to enquire how far such a state of things is reconcilable to wisdom, benevolence, or justice.

The natural and necessary consequences of principles are the same whether the advocates of such principles are apprized of them or not, and whether they do or do not chuse to contemplate and avow them.

It is from the absurd and injurious consequences which necessarily result from Mr. Wilberforce's principles that I infer their falshood, and impiety; and I am confident that if Mr. Wilberforce saw them

them in the same light in which they appear to me, his love of truth and virtue would lead him to reject them with equal abhorrence.

I shall now proceed to exhibit a concise view of rational christianity in its connexion with natural religion.

Of rational religion, the first and fundamental principle is, that the Maker of the universe is infinitely powerful, wise, and good, and that it is impossible for him to act in contradiction to his essential attributes.

GOD IS LOVE. Infinite benevolence *alone* prompted him to action. And infinite benevolence, combined with unerring wisdom, and supported by irresistible power, will infallibly accomplish its purpose in the best possible manner. It appears in fact, that a limited quantity of evil, both natural and moral, was necessary to the production of the greatest possible good. Whence this necessity arises, we know not; but that it could not be avoided in a system upon the whole the best, we are well assured; for God would not chuse evil for its own sake. Evil therefore is introduced and permitted, not because it is *approved*, but because it is *unavoidable*. It is in its own nature temporary and self-destructive; and in the view of the Deity it is absorbed and lost in the contemplation of its ultimate beneficial effects, so that to Him the whole system appears wise, beautiful, and good.

God is the Former, the Father, and Benefactor of the human race, whom for wise reasons, unknown to us, but perfectly consistent, no doubt, with his magnificent plan of universal order and happiness, he has been pleased to place in circumstances of frailty and danger, the natural consequence of which, in their progress through life, is the contraction of a certain degree of moral pollution, which, in the nature of things, and by the divine appointment, exposes them to a proportionate degree of misery here or hereafter.

But this fact by no means proves a preponderance of vice and misery in the world; otherwise we must conclude that the Maker of the world, whose character we learn only from his works, is a weak or a malignant Being. The truth is, that although the quantity of vice and misery actually existing is very considerable, there is nevertheless upon the whole a very great preponderance of good in general, and, with few, if any exceptions, in every individual in particular.

The almost universal desire of life and dread of dissolution, amounts to a strong presumption, that life is in general a blessing. And the disgrace universally attached to flagrant vice, proves that such vice is not common. Character is the sum total of moral and intellectual habits, and the proportion of virtuous habits, in the worst characters exceeds that of vicious ones. But no character takes the deno-

mination of virtuous unless *all* the habits are on the side of virtue : whereas *one* evil habit is sufficient to stamp a character vicious.

God cannot be unjust to any of his creatures. Having brought men into existence and placed them in circumstances of imminent peril, though in the nature of things misery is necessarily connected with vice, we may certainly conclude that none of the creatures of God in *such*, or in *any* circumstances will ever be made *eternally miserable*. Indeed it is plainly repugnant to the justice of God, that the gift of existence to any of his intelligent creatures, should be upon the whole a curse.

The light of philosophy affords a few plausible arguments for the doctrine of a future life : there are some appearances physical and moral, which cannot be satisfactorily explained upon any other supposition. But since the sentient powers are suspended by death, and admit of no revival but by the revival of the man, a fact the expectation of which is entirely unsupported both by experience and analogy, the speculations of philosophy would commonly, and almost necessarily, terminate in the disbelief of a future existence.

Here divine revelation offers its seasonable and welcome aid, God has commissioned his faithful and holy servant, Jesus of Nazareth, to teach the universal resurrection of the dead, and by his own resurrection to confirm and exemplify his doctrine.

Jesus hath authoritatively taught, that the wicked will be raised to suffering; nor could it possibly be otherwise, if they are to be raised with the same system of habits and feelings with which they descended to the grave, and without which their identity would be lost. But since eternal misery for temporary crimes is inconsistent with every principle of justice, and since a resurrection from previous insensibility to indefinite misery, to be succeeded by absolute annihilation, is a harsh supposition, contrary to all analogy, and not to be admitted but upon the clearest evidence, we are naturally led to conclude that the sufferings of the wicked will be remedial, and that they will terminate in a complete purification from moral disorder, and in their ultimate restoration to virtue and happiness. In this conclusion we seem to be justified by those passages in the apostolical writings which declare, that the blessings of the gospel shall be far more extensive than the calamities of the fall*, and that Christ shall reign till all things shall be subdued unto him†.

The apostles were commanded to preach the gospel to the idolatrous heathen as well as to the chosen family of Abraham, and they were authorized to confirm their doctrine by miracles. These extraordinary powers are in the scriptures called the spirit of God, and the holy spirit; and the great change which took place in the views, feelings, and

* Rom. v.

† 1 Cor. xv.

character of pharisaic jews and idolatrous heathen, when they sincerely professed the christian faith, is called, *a new creation, regeneration, rising from the dead*, and the like. And as conversion to christianity was usually produced by the evidence of miracles, this new creation, regeneration, sanctification, or passing from death to life, is in this sense ascribed to the spirit of God.

The jews, having been chosen by God to peculiar privileges, entertained a very high notion of their own dignity, and expressed themselves in the most contemptuous language of the idolatrous gentiles, who were not in covenant with Jehovah. Of themselves they spoke as *a chosen and a holy nation, sons of God, and heirs of the promises*. But the heathens were represented as *sinners, as aliens, as enemies to God*, and the like. In allusion to which forms of expression the converted gentiles being entitled equally with converted jews, to the blessings of the new dispensation, they are therefore said to be *forgiven, reconciled, and saved, to be fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God*.

The death of Jesus is sometimes called a *propitiation*, because it put an end to the mosaic economy, and introduced a new and more liberal dispensation, under which the gentiles, who were before regarded as enemies, are admitted into a state of amity and reconciliation; that is, into a state of privilege similar to that of the jews. It is also occasionally

casionally called a *sacrifice*, being the ratification of that new covenant into which God is pleased to enter with his human offspring, by which a resurrection to immortal life and happiness is promised, without distinction, to all who are truly virtuous. Believers in Christ are also said to have *redemption through his blood*, because they are released by the christian covenant from the yoke of the ceremonial law, and from the bondage of idolatry. Dr. Taylor has in general well explained these jewish phrases in his admirable *Key* to the apostolic writings prefixed to his commentary on the epistle to the Romans.

The scriptures contain a faithful and credible account of the *christian doctrine* which is the *true word of God*: but they are not *themselves* the word of God, nor do they ever assume that title: and it is highly improper to speak of them as such, as it leads inattentive readers to suppose they were written under a plenary inspiration to which they make no pretension, and as such expressions expose christianity unnecessarily to the cavils of unbelievers. Mr. W. and many others, are accustomed to quote texts as distinct inspired aphorisms, without regard to the connexion in which they stand, and often, for want of critical attention to the scriptures, in a sense contrary to their true meaning. In the course of these strictures I shall have occasion to notice many instances of this kind.

Christianity

Christianity sums up the whole of human duty in the love of God and our neighbour : and requiring that *all* our time should be employed to the best account, and that every action should be consecrated to God, lays no stress upon ritual observations, and expressly abolishes that distinction of days which formed so conspicuous a feature in the mosaic institute. To a true Christian, every day is a sabbath, every place is a temple, and every action of life an act of devotion. A christian is not required to be more holy, nor permitted to take greater liberties upon one day than upon another. Whatever is lawful or expedient upon any one day of the week is, under the christian dispensation, equally lawful and expedient on any other day. Public worship, however, must be conducted at stated intervals; and it has been usual from the earliest times for christians to assemble together, on the first day of the week, to commemorate the death, and to celebrate the resurrection of their Master.

This appears to me to be the true doctrine of reason and revelation, in which the God of nature is not represented as frowning over his works, and like a merciless tyrant dooming his helpless creatures to eternal misery, with the arbitrary exception of a chosen few ; but as the wise, benevolent, and impartial parent of his rational offspring, who is training them all under various processes of intellectual and moral discipline to perfect virtue and
everlasting

everlasting felicity. Such is the God of my faith and adoration, the God of nature and of revelation, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, that God whose existence, attributes, and government are the joy and confidence of every enlightened and virtuous believer.

Which of the two systems, delineated above, is most agreeable to reason and revelation, and best adapted to encourage virtue, and to produce rational tranquillity of mind, must be left to the judgment of those who will take the trouble to examine and compare them.

I am, Madam, &c.

LETTER III.

Observations upon the supposed inadequate Conceptions generally entertained of the Importance of Christianity. Comparison between the respect shewn to the scriptures by popular interpreters, and by rational christians.

MADAM,

I NOW proceed, in pursuance of my design, to review Mr. Wilberforce's Treatise; and as it will best answer my purpose to adhere to the author's own method, I hope you will have the goodness to excuse a few occasional repetitions which upon this plan are almost unavoidable.

He begins (p. 7.) with "pointing out the very
"inadequate conceptions which the bulk of pro-
"fessed christians entertain of christianity, and
"complains that their homage is intended to be
"paid not to christianity in particular, but at best
"to religion in general, perhaps to mere morality.
"With christianity as distinct from these they are
"little acquainted."

I like not this distinction between christianity
and religious morality, from which it is inseparable,
and from its tendency to encourage which it derives
all its value. This cold and supercilious manner of
speaking of religion and morality, is liable to be
misapprehended, and tends to generate indifference
towards religious and moral practice. Mr. W. I
am persuaded, has no such intention, but his ex-
pressions should have been more guarded.

By christianity as distinct from religion and mere
morality, Mr. W. probably means the *doctrines* of
the christian religion (p. 8.) "There are," says he,
"some few facts, and perhaps some leading doc-
"trines and principles of which they cannot be
"wholly ignorant, but of the consequences and
"relations, and practical uses of these they have
"few ideas, or none at all."

I shall not now stay to enquire what the *conse-
quences, relations and practical uses* of christian doc-
trines and principles are as *distinct* from religion and
morality, but only observe, that if Mr. W. means

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to affirm that men professing christianity are in general ignorant of its fundamental principles, he is greatly mistaken. These are obvious to the meanest capacity, and no person who is capable of reading the scriptures can doubt that the chief doctrine of Christ and his apostles is, that the virtuous shall rise to happiness, and the vicious to suffering, how little soever their conduct may be governed by a regard to these important principles. But if he means by christianity what he is pleased to call its *peculiar* doctrines, such as original depravity, atonement, and the like, which constitute no part of the christianity of the new testament, it is not much to be regretted, that christians are either totally ignorant of these doctrines, or that professing to believe them they pay little practical attention to them.

Every friend to religion will lament with Mr. W. (p. 8.) "That the children of christian parents, while they are carefully educated in all those accomplishments which belong to their station in life, are left to collect their religion as they may: and that in an age wherein infidelity abounds, they take little care to instruct their children in the principles of the faith which they profess, and to furnish them with arguments for the defence of it." And it is highly probable that much of the infidelity of the age may be traced to this source.

Mr.

Mr. W. in the following pages describes the little practical regard which professed christians in general pay to their principles, and the great inferiority of the common standard of morality, to the requisitions of the gospel. He also justly animadverts upon the criminality of voluntary ignorance, and the extreme folly of "expecting to be christians without labour, study, or enquiry." (p. 15.)

"The diligent perusal of the scriptures," it is added, "would discover to us our past ignorance. We should cease to be deceived by superficial appearances, and to confound the gospel of Christ with the systems of philosophers." Upon this ground I readily join issue with him, and desire nothing more than that our respective theories may be brought to the test of the scriptures critically examined, and rightly understood. And here it may be proper briefly to state the different methods in which the advocates for popular systems, and the friends of rational christianity, express the veneration which both profess for the writings of the apostles and evangelists. This is the more necessary, as rational christians are often accused of not paying due respect to the authority of the scriptures.

Popular writers testify their regard for the scriptures, by asserting or assuming their plenary inspiration—by calling them indiscriminately the word of God—by quoting text upon text without regard to connection,

connection, without proper explanation, without any allowance for figurative language, or jewish phraseology, and without any attempt to ascertain the genuineness of disputed passages; citing detached sentences, as inspired apophthegms, relying with full confidence on the received text, as though the authority of its editors * were equal to that of the apostles, and apparently ignorant of all that has been accomplished by the indefatigable industry, and penetrating sagacity of modern critics †, to correct the text and to bring it nearer to the original standard; equally confiding in the authority of the English translation; and annexing without hesitation or enquiry those senses to disputed phrases which have been learned from obsolete articles and creeds, the product of an age just emerging from barbarism, when neither the language nor the doctrines of the scripture were well understood. This, in the estimation of many, is paying due honour to the christian scriptures.

But the men who in my judgment shew the truest respect to the New Testament, are those who regard

* Erasmus, Robert Stephens, and Beza, who published editions of the Greek Testament from manuscripts in their possession, in the 16th century; since which time little alteration has been made in the received text.

† Upwards of three hundred manuscripts have been collated since the 16th century, by which the received text might be in many places materially corrected.

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the sacred writers as capable and faithful witnesses both of the doctrine which Jesus taught, and of the facts which they relate—who, not forward to admit of any deviation from the laws of nature where the necessity is not obvious, allow the inspiration of the writers of the New Testament in no cases where they do not themselves expressly claim it, and who are not sparing of the labour necessary to distinguish even in the canonical books, what is of divine authority, from that which is of human origin—who believe that the evangelical and apostolic writings contain a complete and authentic account of the doctrine and religion of Jesus—who shew their veneration for the scriptures, not by taking every thing upon trust, but by a diligent enquiry into the genuineness of every book, admitting no one into their canon which cannot satisfactorily prove its title to apostolic origin—who do not hastily allow the infallibility of the received text of those books, whose general authority is acknowledged—who think that the editors of the sixteenth century, however honest, diligent and sagacious, were equally liable to misapprehension and prejudice with later publishers of the sacred text, and have no paramount claim to infallibility—who, conceiving that many new sources of information have been opened in the two last centuries, and that much has been done to correct and improve the received text, will admit no passage as genuine which has found its way

way into the common editions of the scriptures, in opposition to the most approved manuscripts, the most ancient and uncorrupted versions, and the united testimonies of the earliest christian writers—who, having thus obtained a text approximating as nearly as possible to original purity, diligently study the true meaning of oriental imagery, and of jewish idioms and phrases,—who, paying little deference to translations by authority, or to senses arbitrarily annexed to the apostolic language by the prejudiced compilers of catechisms and creeds, follow the great example of Locke in studying the scriptures themselves, and in making them their own interpreters; reading them over repeatedly with due attention to discover the meaning of the author, and the scope of his argument—comparing together similar passages, illustrating the New Testament by the Old, and passages brief, enigmatical, and obscure, by those which are copious, clear, and intelligible; thus extricating the genuine sense, without taking into consideration whether it agrees with this or is repugnant to that hypothesis of vain and ignorant men, who strain the apostolic language to the support of their favourite systems.

This is the way in which rational critics shew their attachment to the christian scriptures. Whether this judicious homage of men of learning and enquiry, or the blind respect of popular interpreters be most honourable to that sacred and inestimable
 volume,

volume, and most worthy the imitation of those who aspire to the high distinction of enlightened and consistent christians, let candour and good sense determine.

I am, Madam, &c.

LETTER IV.

Concerning the supposed Corruption of Human Nature.

MADAM,

MR. Wilberforce having discussed the defective notions which he supposes the bulk of professed christians to entertain of the importance of christianity in general, descends, (c. 2.) to animadvert upon what he deems to be particular misconceptions of its doctrines; and begins (sect. 1.) with "the corruption and weakness of human nature," upon which he assumes a tone of confidence proportioned, I had almost said, to the defect of evidence.

Let us, in entering upon this enquiry, set out upon right principles, and look steadily forward to direct and necessary consequences. It will at least make us circumspect in examining facts, and cautious in admitting conclusions. I assume it as an axiom which needs no proof, that, "whatever we
" are

"are by nature, we are what our Creator made us *." Also that we have no satisfactory rule of judging of the character of the Deity, but from his operations. If in the works of God there is a preponderance of good, both natural and moral, and a continually increasing tendency to ultimate and infinite good, the Creator of the universe is infinitely benevolent. But the melancholy reverse of this is true, if there be a preponderance of evil. If indeed the fact, after impartial and diligent enquiry, appears to be such, we must acquiesce in what we are not able to remedy. But that the Governor of the universe is a malignant Being, is a doctrine so distressing, and to which a well-disposed mind is so averse, that nothing but the most irresistible evidence will ever make it credible.

It is futile to allege, as a palliation of the difficulty, that the first parents of the human race were originally innocent and happy; but that, in consequence of their fall, they contracted a depraved nature which they transmitted to their posterity, for which God is not accountable. Such reasoning as this cannot impose upon the understanding even of a child. Did God resign the direction of his works as soon as he had placed Adam in paradise? Is not his agency as really and as immediately concerned in the formation of every individual of mankind, as in that of their original ancestor? If I am born into

* Practical View, p. 53.

the world a depraved creature, it is by his appointment, and even by his immediate energy. "I am
"what my Creator made me."

It is, if possible, still more preposterous to argue, that although evil prevails in this district of the universe, good may greatly preponderate upon the whole. This is nothing more than an appeal from fact to gratuitous supposition. We can only reason from what we know. If evil prevails as far as our observation extends, we can have no reason to believe that it does not prevail in the same proportion through the universe. Revelation itself could not prove the contrary; for if God be a malignant Being, how can we know that he does not take pleasure in deceiving his creatures? What ground have we for depending upon his veracity?

The question before us then is not a question of mere speculation, it is a question of fact and experience, pregnant with the most serious consequences: it involves the moral character of the Supreme Being. Let us now enquire what view Mr. W. exhibits of the works of his Creator.

From Christianity, says Mr. W. (p. 26) "we
"learn that man is an apostate creature, fallen from
"his high original, degraded in his nature, and de-
"praved in his faculties, indisposed to good, and
"disposed to evil; prone to vice, it is natural and
"easy to him; disinclined to virtue, it is difficult
"and laborious; that he is tainted with sin, not
C "slightly

“slightly and superficially, but *radically, and to the very core.*”

Of the truth of these facts Mr. W. is so confident, that he thinks, (p. 27) that “if this very corruption did not warp the judgment, none would be hardy enough to attempt to controvert them.”

After an eloquent description of the natural powers of man, he proceeds (p. 28) to describe his actual state, and to argue the depravity of human nature from an induction of particulars. With this view he appeals to the character of the ancient heathen, and of modern savages. He argues from the imperfect morals of professing christians, from the perverse and froward disposition of children, from the proneness of men to self-deceit, from the negligence of mere professors, and from the confessions of sincere christians. “This state of facts he affirms (p. 39) cannot be accounted for on any other supposition than that of some original taint, some radical principle of corruption.” Hence he triumphantly concludes, (p. 40) that “the depravity of human nature is proved by the same mode of reasoning as has been deemed exclusive in establishing the existence, and ascertaining the laws of the principle of gravitation, and that the doctrine rests on the same basis as the sublime philosophy of Newton.” “Lest however (says he, p. 51) any should be so *obstinately dull* as not to discern

“discern the force of the evidence suggested to our
“reason, and confirmed by all experience,” revelation
comes in (p. 40) and “sustains the fallible
“conjectures of our unassisted reason.” And he
produces a number of texts which in his judgment
prove the doctrine; adding, (p. 41) “that passages
“might be multiplied upon passages, which speak
“the same language; and these again might be il-
“lustrated and confirmed at large by various other
“considerations.” So that (p. 51) “we must be
“altogether inexcusable if we still remain uncon-
“vinced by such an accumulated mass of argu-
“ment.”

Such is the account Mr. W. gives of the state of
man by nature, that is, as he comes out of the
hands of his Maker. And he does not hesitate to
represent this doctrine (p. 24) “as lying at the root
“of all true religion, and as eminently the basis and
“ground work of christianity.”

“Inexcusable” as it may appear to Mr. Wilber-
force, I am not ashamed to avow myself to be one
of those who are either so “*obstinately dull*,” or
“whose judgments are so warped by this very cor-
“ruption,” as not to be convinced by an “accu-
“mulated mass” of arguments which are at one
time represented as “equivalent to the demonstra-
“tions of the Newtonian philosophy,” and at an-
other styled, with more propriety, “fallible conjec-
“tures,”

"tures," and which are feebly supported by an injudicious collection of unexplained and misapplied passages of scripture. I do not see reason to believe that the wise and benevolent Creator has introduced into existence his human offspring, "tainted to the very core with sin." And I hesitate not to say, that whoever affirms this, impeaches the character of his Maker and traduces his works. The following observations will, I hope, state the matter in a clear and satisfactory light.

Character is the sum total of habits. But in forming an estimate of moral worth, it is an invariable principle that *one* vice stamps a character vicious, while a thousand virtues will not atone for one immoral habit. If a man be a liar, or dishonest, or intemperate, or impious, his character is denominated vicious, with whatever virtues it may otherwise be adorned. "He who keepeth the whole law, and offendeth in one point, is guilty of all." And the reason is evident, virtue is that system of habits which conduces to the greatest ultimate happiness; vice is that which diminishes happiness, or produces misery. The union therefore of a single vice with a constellation of virtues, will contaminate them all; will prevent them from producing their proper effect, and will, in proportion as it prevails, diminish the happiness, or produce the misery of the agent, who never can attain the true end of his
existence

existence till this vice is eradicated. He cannot enjoy perfect moral health till every mental disorder is radically removed.

Hence it follows, that there may be a considerable preponderance of virtues even in characters justly estimated as vicious, and likewise that the *quantity* of virtue in the world may far exceed that of vice, though the *number* of virtuous characters may be less than that of vicious ones.

And this is the real state of things. That a very considerable proportion of moral evil actually exists, and indeed far more than we should antecedently have expected under the government of God, cannot be denied: The exact sum can never be known. But that vice upon the whole predominates over virtue, is contrary to experience: Few characters are flagrantly wicked; and perhaps, even in the worst of men, good habits and actions are more numerous than the contrary. Certainly they are so in the majority of mankind. And though perfect rectitude is no where to be found, preponderant virtue is almost universal.

We hear more of the vices of men than of their virtues: and why? Because virtue is the *ordinary* state of things, and no notice is taken of it: vice is a deviation from the accustomed order, and therefore it is remarked and recorded. Children, we are told, (p. 34) "are perverse and froward;" that is, they now and then discover such a temper, and

every instance of it is noted. But of their innocence, their gentleness, their playfulness, their facility of being pleased, or pacified, and the like, no notice is taken, because it is their usual state. The virtue of honesty assumes the name of *common* from its very general prevalence, and "mere morality" seems, even in Mr. W.'s estimation, to be a cheap commodity. How much more frequent is moderation than gross intemperance, and how much more common is goodness than wickedness? In a word, such is the situation in which we are happily placed by Divine Providence, that although in the best characters some imperfection exists, and in the majority of mankind more than one vice prevails, yet a preponderance of virtue is, with very few exceptions, generated in all.

Mr. W. will hardly maintain what some have strangely asserted; that all actions and habits previous to conversion, are sinful. The refutation of such an absurdity would be an abuse of argument.

The existence of evil in the degree in which it prevails, "cannot be accounted for according to Mr. W. (p. 39) on any other supposition than "that of some original taint, some radical principle "of corruption." The only enquiry of importance upon this subject, is into the quantity and proportion of the evil which actually exists. How it was first introduced is a question comparatively of little moment. The difficulty is the same upon all hypotheses. All must ultimately be referred to God.
"He

"He made light and created darkness, he made peace and created evil." My controversy with Mr. W. is not about the origin of evil, but the degree and design of it. With regard to the former question, though it may be allowed that in some instances children seem to inherit the vices as well as the diseases of their parents; yet in general it appears most probable, that as men are the creatures of circumstances, the habits they form, whether good or bad, are the result of the impressions to which they are exposed.

All vice must suffer its proper punishment, that is, moral evil must be expelled by the application of natural evil; and if the discipline of the present life is not adequate to this end, the process must be carried on by the severer sufferings of a future retribution. This is indeed an alarming consideration, even to men of the best characters, for there are very few who have attained that perfection of virtue which will exempt them from all painful apprehensions with regard to their future state of being. "Strait is the gate and narrow is the way that leads to life, and few there be that find it." But on the contrary, the preponderance of virtuous affections, even in characters contaminated with gross vice, affords a pleasing presumption, that whatever intermediate scene of suffering may await the offender, virtue will ultimately triumph, and that all

the rational creatures of God will in the end be perfectly holy and happy.

Mr. W.'s arguments from scripture in favour of the corruption of human nature, are as little to the purpose as his appeal to facts, and afford a curious specimen of his loose and injudicious mode of reasoning from scripture authority. He has indeed (p. 40) collected together a number of texts, but without any regard either to their authority or connexion; and I give him credit when he adds, at the conclusion, that "passages might be multiplied upon passages," in the same manner and without end. He quotes some sentences from the book of Job; but before we can bow to this authority as divine, Mr. W. must inform us whether it be the author of the book who is inspired, or the speakers, or both, and in what degree. The quotations are made from a speech of Eliphaz, ch. xx. 14—16. "The imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth." But to Eliphaz, and his friends, Jehovah expressly declares, ch. xlii. 7. "You have not spoken of me the thing that is right." Yet this man's doctrine Mr. W. calls holy scripture, and cites as of divine authority. It would also be difficult to prove that David, in his penitential lamentation over his enormous crime, wrote under a divine impulse, or that Solomon was supernaturally endowed with any other than political wisdom.

Mr. W. has also pressed into his service a text from St. Paul, Rom. vii. 24. "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" in which the apostle personifying an alarmed jew, asks where he shall find sufficient power to release him from the tyranny of those vicious habits which the law, by driving him to despair, cherished and strengthened, and which continually adhered to him and distressed him, like a dead body fastened to a living man. If Mr. W. doubts the truth of this interpretation, he may consult those truly eminent critics, Locke and Taylor. They likewise would inform him that the other text which he has quoted from the epistle to the Ephesians, ch. ii. 3. "We were by nature children of wrath, even as others," means nothing more than that the persons to whom he wrote had been *originally* gentiles, enslaved like others to the idolatries and the vices of their heathen state *.

If I have in any degree vindicated to your satisfaction the character of the human species, and of its divine and benevolent Author, from the heavy and unproved charges alleged against both in the treatise of Mr. W. it will afford sincere pleasure to,
Madam, &c.

* He that reads and considers, says Mr. Locke in his noted upon the passage, cannot doubt that St. Paul here under the terms *we* and *our*, speaks of the gentile converts.

LETTER V.

*Concerning the supposed Evil Spirit, and the natural
State of Man.*

MADAM,

THE doctrine of a devil, and of his agency, of a being of pure malevolence, who is to every practical purpose omnipresent and omniscient, and endued with formidable and indefinite powers, whose sole employment is to do mischief and to tempt men to sin, which finds a zealous advocate in Mr. W. is so highly improbable in itself, and bears so hard upon the wisdom and benevolence of the divine character, that nothing short of the most decisive evidence can establish the fact. In order to this it must first be proved, that the sacred writers believed and taught the existence and agency of this strange and anomalous Being; and secondly, that this doctrine was communicated to them by revelation, and that they were authorized to make it known to the world. Neither of these points can be made out to the satisfaction of an intelligent and critical reader of the scriptures: the doctrine therefore falls to the ground. And I, for one, am not ashamed to avow that I regard the notion of a devil and his agency, as “an evanescent prejudice
“ which

“ which it is now a discredit to a man of understanding to believe.” p. 42.

Mr. W. however, affirms, with his usual confidence, (p. 42.) “ That the word of God instructs us that we have to contend not only with our own natural depravity, but with the power of darkness, the *Evil Spirit*, who rules in the hearts of the wicked, and whose dominion we learn from scripture to be so general as to entitle him to the denomination of the Prince of this World.” He further adds, “ that the existence and agency of the *Evil Spirit* are distinctly and repeatedly affirmed in scripture.”

But notwithstanding these positive assertions, the truth is, that the existence of an evil spirit is nowhere expressly taught as a doctrine of revelation. It was unknown to the jews previous to the captivity, but was probably borrowed by their learned men, at that time, from the oriental philosophy, of which it is well known to have constituted an essential part. After their return it became, in process of time, the popular creed, and the popular language being gradually fashioned to it, was adopted equally by those who did, and those who did not believe the theory upon which it was founded. Hence in the New Testament we find evil natural and moral often ascribed to the devil, to demons, or the ghosts of wicked men *. But neither Jesus nor

* See Farmer on the Demoniacs.

his apostles ever explicitly declare that they themselves admitted the philosophy which governed the language of the country in which they lived, much less do they profess to teach it as of divine authority. They leave the mythology of evil spirits, like many other popular opinions and prejudices, in the same state in which they found it, to be corrected in the course of time by the principles which they taught, and by the growing good sense of mankind. We may indeed fancy that they ought to have contradicted the doctrine if it had not been true, or, at least, that they ought not to have countenanced it by the use of popular language. But what right have we to assert this, or to dictate to the Supreme Being, to what objects revelation shall extend? The fact is, that the first teachers of christianity neither positively affirm nor authoritatively contradict the existence and agency of an evil spirit; but express themselves upon this subject exactly as the rest of their contemporaries would. The doctrine therefore rests upon its own evidence, that is, upon no evidence at all.

Upon this subject Mr. W. contents himself with assertion without proof. He indeed tells us that "the evil spirit is entitled to the denomination of "the prince of this world." The expression occurs John. xiv. 30. "The prince of this world cometh "and hath nothing in me." It is not easy to ascertain the sense of this text, but to explain it of the devil

devil is perfectly arbitrary. Perhaps, the true meaning is, that Jesus was about to be unjustly arrested by order of the magistrate *. And upon this interpretation what becomes of the argument for the universal dominion of the evil spirit?

Mr. W. mentions no other text as countenancing his doctrine, excepting p. 46, where he quotes Jude, ver. 6. "The angels who kept not their first estate he has reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day." The writer of this obscure epistle here argues with his readers upon their professed principles, alluding to a mythology, which probably was at that time familiar, but is now lost; nor can any thing be inferred from a composition the genuineness of which is known to be very doubtful. At any rate it proves nothing concerning diabolical agency, for it represents the fallen angels not as ranging at liberty, but as bound in chains.

Mr. W. is pleased to remark, p. 43. That "although the scripture doctrine," as he unwarrantably terms it, "concerning the evil spirit is thus generally exploded, yet were we to consider the matter seriously and fairly, we should probably find

* See a similar expression, 1 Cor. ii. 8. where the Jewish rulers who crucified our Lord are certainly the persons intended. "Which none of the princes of this world knew, for had they known it they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory."

"ground

“ground for believing that there is no better reason
 “for its being abandoned, than that many absurd
 “stories concerning spirits and apparitions have
 “been used to be believed and propagated amongst
 “weak and credulous people, and that the evil
 “spirit not being the object of our bodily eyes, it
 “would be an instance of the same weakness to
 “give credit to the doctrine of its existence and
 “agency.”

The disputant who can urge this weak objection, may, perhaps, be satisfied with Mr. W.'s irrelevant reply: in which all that he attempts to prove is, that it is no more incredible that an immaterial being should be a tempter, than a material one. He seems, indeed, to think it necessary to help out his argument with the unqualified assertion, p. 44. that to “deny the existence and operation of these qualities in an immaterial being, is in *direct contradiction to the authority of scripture.*” But as no such authority is produced, we may hope to be excused if we do not, upon his bare word, admit a doctrine which appears to be unfounded in argument or experience, and subversive of the most important principles of natural and revealed religion.

The true reason why men of sense reject the notion of diabolical agency is, the total want of evidence to prove it. As philosophers, they discover no phænomena which countenance the hypothesis of an invisible malignant energy; and as attentive
 readers

readers of the christian scriptures, they see nothing to warrant such a conclusion, but a sort of language, which a competent acquaintance with the oriental style would teach them to interpret in a figurative and mythological, and not in a literal and historical sense.

It is observed, p. 44. that "this topic, however
"it may excite the ridicule of the inconsiderate,
"will suggest matter of serious apprehension to all
"who form their opinions on the authority of the
"word of God: Thus brought as we are into captivity and exposed to danger, depraved and weakened within, and tempted from without, it might
"well fill our hearts with anxiety, &c." And indeed it would be a most alarming consideration, if we had reason to believe that we lay at the mercy of what our author calls "the evil spirit;" or that any such being was permitted to hold intercourse with this world, and to gain access to the human mind. Happily for us, there is no evidence from reason to prove that any spirit, good or evil, shares with the Supreme in the government of the universe; nor do the scriptures, carefully studied and rightly understood, authorize any such unphilosophical and mischievous opinion.

Mr. W. towards the conclusion of this section, reverts to his favourite doctrine of the corruption of human nature, the disbelief of which, according to him, is attended with the most fatal consequences.

"It

“It is here,” he says, p. 50. “that our foundation
 “must be laid, otherwise our superstructure will
 “prove tottering and insecure. This is no meta-
 “physical speculation, but a practical matter.
 “Slight and superficial conceptions of our natural
 “state of degradation, and of our insufficiency to
 “recover from it of ourselves, produce a fatal in-
 “sensitivity to the Divine warning, &c.” All this
 is eloquent declamation and positive assertion, but it
 wants proof.

It is curious to mark the progress of Mr. W.’s
 system : P. 26. “We are by nature tainted with sin,
 “not slightly and superficially, but radically, and to
 “the very core.” P. 42. “In addition to this, we
 “have to contend with an evil spirit, who rules in
 “the hearts of the wicked.” P. 46. “Revelation
 “teaches that the wages of sin is death,” that is,
 P. 60. “An *eternity* of unspeakable misery.” P. 45.
 “The account it gives of the character of our
 “Judge, and of the probable principles of his de-
 “termination, serves to turn painful apprehension
 “into fixed and certain terror.” P. 50. “Deliver-
 “ance is proclaimed and indeed offered, and we are
 “plainly admonished to work out our salvation, but
 “we are unable of ourselves to will or to do rightly.”

In this state the great mass of mankind are left.
 Born into the world with a nature radically tainted
 with sin, they can neither will nor do any thing
 without that aid which God will not impart, and
 for

for want of which they are doomed to eternal and unspeakable misery. These, according to Mr. W. are the fundamental and peculiar doctrines of that gospel which we are assured "contains glad tidings of great joy for all people." Happily for us, Madam, "we have not so learned Christ."

I am, &c.

L E T T E R VI.

Objection to the Doctrine of the Corruption of Human Nature farther considered.

MADAM,

MR. Wilberforce is very ingenuous in stating the objections of his opponents, which is a proof that he writes under a full conviction of the truth of his own principles. And though I agree with our author (p. 19) that "Sincerity is not all in all," we must still allow it to hold a distinguished place in the catalogue of virtues, though it may sometimes be associated with error and prejudice. It must however excite surprise in an attentive reader that he can be perfectly satisfied with his own answers to the objections which he so fairly states.

He introduces (p. 53) "a bold objector, facing about and standing at bay, endeavouring to justify what he cannot deny. Whatever I am," he contends,

tends, " *I am what my Creator made me. I inherit*
 " *a nature, you yourself confess, depraved, and*
 " *prone to evil: how then can I withstand the*
 " *temptations to sin with which I am environed? If*
 " *this plea cannot establish my innocence, it must*
 " *excuse, or at least extenuate my guilt. Frail and*
 " *weak as I am, a Being of infinite justice and good-*
 " *ness will never try me by a rule, which, however*
 " *equitable in the case of creatures of a higher na-*
 " *ture, is altogether disproportionate to mine.*"

This is the language which Mr. W. puts into the mouth of his *bold* objector. But if this objector were to grow a little *bolder* still, and not to be afraid of speaking out plainly, he might add; " Being what my Creator made me, naturally prone to evil, tainted to the very core with sin, unable even to *will* what is right, how is it possible that a God of infinite justice and goodness should condemn me to eternal misery, for not having extricated myself from the wretched condition in which he himself has fixed me, without ability to move?"

If Mr. W. can return a satisfactory reply to these objections, he must be an able advocate indeed. Let us then examine his arguments.

Mr. W. first (p. 53) warns his readers " not to be alarmed, as the writer is not going to enter into the discussion of the grand question concerning the origin of moral evil." Indeed there seems little occasion for an alarm upon this head, as the only

only question is about a plain simple fact. Can infinite justice and goodness doom a being to eternal misery, for no other cause, but that of not extricating himself out of the state in which his Creator placed him, without any power to act or will? I see nothing in this case which involves questions, "the full and clear comprehension of which is above the intellect of man;" no difficulty which a man of common understanding might not solve with as much facility as the profoundest metaphysician or the ablest moralist. Indeed it is a question which sufficiently answers itself; and hardy is the disputant who will seriously maintain the affirmative.

Mr. W. distinguishes his opponents into *sceptics* and believers. And (p. 54) "he despairs of satisfying the sceptic of the soundness of his own reasonings, though he thinks it not very difficult to expose the futility of those of the sceptic." He argues, "that as his pre-conceptions concerning the conduct of the Supreme Being, have been in fact already contradicted, particularly by the existence of natural or moral evil, having been proved erroneous in one instance, they might also in another." But the analogy will not hold. It may be allowed that the existence of evil under the divine government would not antecedently have been expected. The fact however being established, it may not be difficult to reconcile it to the wisdom and benevolence of the divine character.

But,

But, the radical corruption of human nature, in consequence of which the mass of mankind are doomed to helpless and to hopeless misery, never has, and never can be proved to be a fact; and could the existence of this radical corruption be established, the eternal punishment of it could never be reconciled to any principle of justice.

Mr. W. thinks, that "the best method of convincing a sceptic, would be first to prove the truth of our holy religion," and then (p. 55) to "put it to him whether all this weight of evidence were to be overbalanced by this one difficulty upon a subject so confessedly high and mysterious."

Mr. W. is perfectly right in concluding that no intelligent sceptic would be satisfied with the soundness of such reasonings. Such an one would deny the subject to be either high or mysterious. No axiom can be more self-evident than this, that if God be just, he cannot make men naturally corrupt and vicious, and then condemn them to eternal misery for being so. And if he has any rational ideas of the Supreme Being, he will never admit that to be a revelation from heaven, which contains a doctrine so flagrantly repugnant to his perfections.

Mr. W. despairing of making much impression upon sceptics, proceeds to address himself (p. 56) to believers; "and in order to convince all such that there is, somewhere or other, a fallacy in the
" objector's

“objector’s reasoning,” he says, “it will be sufficient to establish, that though the word of God clearly asserts the justice and goodness of the Supreme Being, and also the natural depravity of man, yet it no less clearly lays down, that this natural depravity shall never be admitted as an excuse for sin;” and that, “the holy scriptures are clear and full in guarding us against supposing our sins, or the dreadful consequences of them, to be chargeable upon God.”

If Mr. W.’s believer would be satisfied with such reasoning as this, it is well; but a rational christian, who reads the scriptures with attention, and makes them their own interpreters, would reply; that no such doctrine as natural or hereditary depravity is revealed in them; much less do they denounce eternal misery as the inevitable consequence of natural corruption. And that the notion altogether is so palpably repugnant to truth and justice, that if one or two detached passages should even seem to give countenance to it, such insulated texts ought to be interpreted in a sense consonant to the general tenor of the scriptures, and the acknowledged perfections of God.

It is suggested (p. 58) as the “best practical answer to the difficulty, that if our natural condition be depraved and weak, our temptations numerous, and our Almighty Judge infinitely holy; yet that the offers to *penitent* sinners of pardon and grace
“are

"are universal and unlimited." But, with Mr. W.'s leave, this is no answer to the difficulty at all. The objection does not by any means respect those, who by the agency of the Holy Spirit are regenerated, and made true penitents, and who certainly have no reason to complain as far as they are personally concerned; but it respects the great mass of mankind, who having been created depraved, and the requisite assistance being withheld, are therefore doomed to eternal misery. And he has not yet advanced a single step towards the removal of this difficulty.

Mr. W. it seems, not perfectly satisfied with his own reasonings, either with believers or unbelievers, finds it convenient to have recourse to the usual asylum of *mystery*. "Let it not surprise us," says he, (p. 59) "if in all this there seem to be involved difficulties which we cannot fully comprehend;" adding, "that many such every where present themselves that in this our ignorance we may calmly repose on the divine declaration, that righteousness and judgment are the habitation of His throne; that it is true wisdom to attach ourselves to what is plain and obvious; assenting to what is revealed where above our faculties, on the credit of what is clearly discerned, &c." But all this is irrelevant declamation. We again and again deny that there is any mystery in the case. The doctrine laid down by Mr. W. is perfectly intelligible, and it is plainly

dictory to every principle of justice, to every attribute of Deity, and to the whole tenor of divine revelation.

But if neither reasoning nor mystery will answer the objection, *anathemas* offer their ready service to supply the deficiency; not indeed in the old and rugged form of ecclesiastical commination, but in the humbler guise of pathetic lamentation. "It is indeed "an awful and affecting spectacle," says our author, (p. 60) "to see men thus busying themselves in "these vain speculations of an arrogant curiosity, "and trifling with their dearest their everlasting interests." But Mr. W. may be assured that men of sense, who are truly concerned for the credit of the christian religion, will not be intimidated by unjust charges of improper motives, nor by unauthorized insinuations of divine displeasure, from a rigorous enquiry into the pretensions of those doctrines which falsely assume the name and credit of revealed truths; or from exposing them to the contempt and indignation which they deserve. And though many may be disposed to treat such enquiries as "vain speculations," and may think it best that men should "*repose in their ignorance*;" there are some who will not think their time unworthily occupied in endeavouring to clear the christian doctrine from the corruptions with which it is encumbered.

Mr.

Mr. Wilberforce (p. 61) illustrates what he calls
 “the exquisite folly of this conduct, by comparing
 “it with that of some convicted rebel, who, when
 “brought into the presence of his sovereign, in-
 “stead of seizing the occasion to sue for mercy,
 “should even neglect and trifle with the pardon
 “which should be offered him, and insolently em-
 “ploy himself in prying into his sovereign’s designs
 “and criticising his counsels.”

But let me ask which of the two has most reason to apprehend his sovereign’s displeasure, the man who grossly traduces his prince’s character, and represents him as an arbitrary, malignant, and odious tyrant; or he who endeavours to rescue his administration from groundless and unjust imputations, and to convince his fellow-subjects that the government under which they live, is wise, and just, and beneficent? Let not Mr. W. then be so ready to denounce judgment upon his fellow-christians who think more honourably of the Sovereign of the Universe than himself; and who are desirous of counteracting those injurious misrepresentations of the divine government, which he has (inadvertently no doubt, and without any evil intention) so industriously disseminated.

I am, Madam, &c.

LETTER

L E T T E R VII.

*Concerning what Mr. Wilberforce calls "scripture
"doctrines."*

MADAM,

MR. Wilberforce having finished his observations upon the "inadequate conceptions generally entertained of the importance of christianity," and upon "the corruption of human nature," proceeds (c. 3) to represent what he esteems the "chief defects of the religious system of the bulk of professed christians in what regards our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit;" and begins (Sect. 1.) with stating what he calls "scripture doctrines."

In the first of these, all christians will verbally unite, viz. "that God so loved the world, as of his tender mercy to give his only Son Jesus Christ for our redemption." Mr. W. has not explained the sense in which he understands these words; nor is it material. The true meaning probably is, that the mission of Jesus was appointed by the goodness of God to recover men from the empire of idolatry and vice, and from the bondage of the ceremonial law.

His next position is, "That our blessed Lord willingly left the glory of the Father, and was made man."

D

Mr.

Mr. W. does not affect to express this doctrine in the language of the New Testament, and with good reason; for, how clearly soever it may be contained in articles and creeds, nothing like it is to be found in the christian scriptures. That Jesus of Nazareth was "willingly" made a human being, is a thought too extravagant to have entered the minds of the sacred writers, nor is it in any degree countenanced by the language they adopt.

Amongst other texts Mr. W. quotes a celebrated passage from Isa. liii. "the Lord laid upon him the iniquity of us all;" from which some have strangely inferred, that Jesus bore all the sufferings due to the sins of the elect. It probably alludes to the ceremony of the scape-goat, Lev. xvi. which is represented as carrying away into the wilderness the sins of ignorance of the whole people, which Aaron confessed laying his hand upon its head; and means no more than that the errors and vices of a heathen state are no longer a bar to the exercise of mercy, but that God by Jesus Christ communicates the blessings of the gospel with equal freedom to jews and gentiles. In allusion to this it is also said, that "he bore away their iniquities;" and that "he took away the sins of *the many*;" that is, of the gentiles; meaning, that by him God freely exercised mercy to the heathen world *.

* See Isa. liii. 11, 12. Mr. Dodson's translation.

Mr. W. also cites, Rom. viii. 34. "He is now at the right hand of God, making intercession for us." This office of intercession is also ascribed to Jesus in another text, Heb. vii. 25. "He ever liveth to make intercession for them." The exact import of the phrase it is very difficult to ascertain. Probably, indeed, the writers themselves annexed no very distinct idea to it. At any rate the literal and popular interpretation cannot be true; for God, an infinite spirit, hath no right hand at which Jesus can stand to intercede. The word in the original expresses any interference of one person *for* or *against* another *; and all that we can certainly learn from the apostle's declaration is, that Jesus, having been advanced to great dignity and felicity, is, by the appointment of God, continually employing his renovated and improved powers in some unknown way for the benefit of his church. We may *imagine* what we please, but more than this is not revealed, and therefore more than this it cannot be necessary for us to believe.

The distinct personal existence of the *Holy Spirit*, which our author seems to assume, (p. 63) is, I believe, abandoned by every person who has paid much attention to the phraseology of the scriptures; and can indeed be maintained upon no other principles but such as would equally prove that wind, fire, and

* See Dr. Taylor's Note on Rom. viii. 27.

pestilence, the plagues of Egypt, and the scriptures themselves, were real persons. Dr. Lardner has set this subject in so clear a light in his first postscript to his celebrated letter on the Logos, that the controversy is almost as much at rest as that concerning transubstantiation. Whether it be the doctrine of "our excellent liturgy" or not, is of little consequence to the enquirer who looks to the scriptures *only* for information concerning revealed truth.

Mr. W. (p. 64) "wishes to God it could be
 "presumed that all who assent to his opinions in
 "terms, discern their force and excellency in the
 "understanding, and feel their power in the af-
 "fections, and their transforming influence in the
 "heart." And he thinks (p. 65) that "had we
 "duly felt the burden of our sins, that they are a
 "load which our own strength is wholly unable to
 "support, and that the weight of them must finally
 "sink us into perdition, our hearts would have
 "danced at the sound of the gracious invitation,
 "Come unto me, all ye that labour, and are heavy
 "laden, and I will give you rest. But in those
 "who have scarcely felt their sins as any incum-
 "brance, it would be mere affectation to pretend to
 "very exalted conceptions of the value and ac-
 "ceptableness of the proffered deliverance."

Such expressions as *feeling the burden and insupportable load of sin*, may perhaps be suitable to persons

sions of very profligate characters, but it is absurd to apply such language universally. For persons educated in christian principles, habits, and duties, who have never deviated into gross vices, it would be "mere affectation" to pretend to feel that load and burden upon their minds which is the proper concomitant of atrocious guilt: Nor do I see any use in men of upright and virtuous characters representing themselves to their own imaginations as demons and monsters. Neither the language nor the examples of scripture warrant any thing of the kind. Our Saviour's invitation above cited, is addressed not to sinners in particular, but to persons suffering under the heavy load of pharisaic rites, which on another occasion he calls "burdens grievous to be borne;" and in comparison with which, his own religion "was a gentle and an easy yoke."

But Mr. W. fancies, that without this "feeling of the burden of sin," we shall have no very exalted conceptions of the "proffered deliverance;" and as error is often systematical, and one leading prejudice involves a train of others, I can agree with him, that without this *fanciful* notion of the weight and burden of sin, there will be little occasion for his equally *fanciful* doctrines of satisfaction, atonement, intercession, and supernatural influence. But a person who is satisfied with the simple scheme of the New Testament without these superfluous,

supplementary articles, will, while he maintains a proper sense of the dignity of human nature, and reflects with pleasure upon the purity and integrity of his general character, see great reason to be thankful for the deliverance of so large a part of the world from the bondage of idolatry by the promulgation of the gospel, and for the glorious prospect of immortal life and happiness which it opens to view, and by which it strengthens the fortitude and animates the zeal of every virtuous believer.

It is observed (p. 68) that "the Unitarian and Socinian, who deny or explain away the peculiar doctrines of the gospel, may be allowed to feel and talk of these grand truths with little emotion."

Mr. W. here makes a just distinction, which, though sufficiently obvious in itself, is often through ignorance or design overlooked, namely, that between the Socinian, and the Unitarian. The former believes, that although Jesus had no existence before his birth, yet that since his resurrection he has been advanced to the government of the universe; a notion unscriptural and most incredible. But a consistent Unitarian, acknowledging Jesus as a man in all respects "like to his brethren," regards his kingdom as entirely of a spiritual nature, and as consisting in the empire of his gospel over the hearts and lives of its professors.

Unitarian

Unitarian christians believe in the resurrection of their venerated Master; and upon his authority, confirmed by that event, they entertain a cheerful persuasion, that if they obey his gospel, and follow his great example in a fearless profession of truth, and an upright discharge of duty, they shall in due time be raised by the power of God to a happy and immortal life.

Of such christians as these Mr. W. asserts with a tone of authority which the consciousness of infallibility alone could warrant, that they "deny or explain away the peculiar doctrines of the gospel." But their severe censor may be assured, that they have learned from higher authority than his, that "it is a very small thing to be judged of man's judgment*." And they would request him seriously to reflect, whether he may not himself be liable to the charge of making unauthorised additions to the genuine doctrine of christianity, which deface its beauty, obstruct its progress, and diminish its practical effect.

Mr. W. proceeds (p. 69) to describe love to Christ as "an ardent active principle," and he insists upon the natural expressions of strong affections as applicable to this case. But the only criterion of genuine regard which our Master himself prescribes, is the practice of virtue from respect to the motives of the gospel. "He that hath my commandments

* 1 Cor. iv. 3.

“and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me.” Whoever therefore possesses this authentic character of genuine affection to Christ, may rest perfectly satisfied, whether they do or do not come up to our author's standard of ardent feeling.

In (p. 71) we have a complaint that “the doctrine of the sanctifying operations of the Holy Spirit appears to have met with still worse treatment than that of love to Christ.” But Mr. W. himself “appears” to be under a considerable error upon this subject, for want of sufficient attention to the true sense of the scripture language.

It is evident to every person competently acquainted with sacred phraseology, that the *Spirit of God* sometimes signifies *God himself*, and sometimes *divine inspiration*. The *Holy Spirit* usually means the *miraculous powers* communicated to the apostles, by which the christian religion was confirmed at its first promulgation; and jews and heathens having been converted by this impressive evidence, they are said to be regenerated, renewed, or sanctified by the Holy Spirit; that is, recovered from a state of heathenism or pharisaism, which is in scripture language a state of alienation from God, and enmity to him, into a state of visible profession, and of privilege. Mr. W. and many others understand that in a moral sense, which the writers intend in a ceremonial, and apply expressions indiscriminately to all persons, which the connexion and scope of the passage limits

limits to the first converts from judaism and heathenism.

Mr. W.'s creed representing the Holy Spirit as a divine person, equal with the Father, whose office it is to sanctify the heart, naturally leads him to discuss the doctrine of a divine influence upon the mind for moral purposes, (p. 72, 75.) But it has never yet been proved that any supernatural influence upon the mind is necessary under the divine government, or that it has ever existed, except in a few very extraordinary cases. Every philosophic theist will allow, that all events are brought to pass agreeably to the divine foreknowledge, and according to the wise and benevolent counsels of God. Also, that a divine energy is actually exerted in every event, according to certain rules which God has prescribed to himself, few will deny. True philosophy and true religion lead us to see God in every thing. But that he *ever*, much more that he *frequently*, deviates from his usual course to produce effects upon the human mind, which would not have resulted from the natural operation of general laws, is a fact improbable in itself, and of which we have no satisfactory evidence, either from experience or revelation. In popular language, the virtuous affections of virtuous men are with great propriety ascribed to God, and the pious writers of the scriptures have often adopted this form of expression. Whether they themselves believed in the ex-

istence of frequent supernatural operations upon the mind, does not clearly appear; and it is certain that they no where affirm, that it constituted any part of their commission, to teach this extraordinary and improbable doctrine. The agency which they admitted extends to evil as well as to good; it “hardens the heart of Pharaoh*,” as well as “opens that of Lydia†;” and therefore it is a general, and not a particular influence. Consequently, the popular language of the sacred writings by no means authorises the conclusion, that God ever interposes supernaturally to produce moral effects upon the mind; the expectation of which is liable to great abuse, and has often been productive of very pernicious consequences.

This section concludes with a just and honourable testimony to the excellent character, and the prudent and successful zeal, of the Moravian brethren, in which I most cheerfully concur; but I would take occasion incidentally to remark, that a religious party may be very numerous, very pious and benevolent, very zealous and successful, and yet by Mr. W.’s own concession (for he is no Moravian himself) its distinguishing tenets may be erroneous and unscriptural.

I am, Madam, &c.

* Exod. vii. 3.

† Acts xvi. 14.

L E T T E R VIII.

*Concerning the admission of the Passions into Religion.
Of Love to Christ.*

MADAM,

MR. Wilberforce, p. 8c—86, treats at considerable length on the admission of the passions, or affections, into religion; the reasonableness and importance of which, under proper regulations, will not be disputed by any who think justly upon the subject. Religion can hardly be said to exist without them. Affections being internal feelings, which arise naturally, and spontaneously, from correspondent views and apprehensions of their specific objects; complacency, gratitude, reverence, confidence, joy, and resignation, will be necessarily generated by frequent serious contemplation of the Supreme Being, as a perfectly wise, powerful, and benevolent father, benefactor, friend, governor, and judge. And affections so formed will be a powerful stimulus to that course of conduct which will be most acceptable to God. Devotion gives energy and dignity to virtue, and the christian revelation justly represents *love to God* as the “first and great commandment.”

It is, however, necessary to observe, that love to God is a beneficial affection, only in proportion to the truth and justice of the ideas which men enter-

tain of the divine attributes and government. If we conceive of God as perfectly benevolent and wise, and desirous of the happiness of his creatures as the sole end of his righteous administration, love to him will be a rational and a delightful affection, and will naturally express itself not only in external acts of grateful homage, but in universal complacency and good will, and in a solicitous concern to co-operate with the beneficent Creator in doing good, in alleviating misery, and in diffusing happiness.

But if our ideas of the Supreme Being are erroneous and unjust, the affections towards him will be proportionably distorted. It will be difficult to conceive of God as an arbitrary and capricious tyrant, without being on the one hand overwhelmed with terror, or, on the other, disposed to cherish the affections we ascribe to him, and to regard the supposed objects of Divine displeasure with disgust and malevolence. The history of religion, in all ages, is replete with the baneful effects of that "zeal for God which is not according to knowledge."

After all, though the objects of religion are of sufficient dignity and magnitude to excite and interest our best affections when steadily contemplated, it ought to be remembered, that a mechanical glow of the passions is by no means essential to the practice of religion and virtue, especially at the commencement of a virtuous course. Men enter upon and pursue their occupations in life, not from

passionate feelings, but from rational conviction that these are the best means of providing, in a just and honourable way, for the subsistence, comfort, and respectability of themselves and their families: and if the employment is at first irksome, the principles upon which they act will stimulate them to perseverance, and by degrees they will form an attachment to professions to which originally they were little inclined. In like manner, a person of reflection will enter upon the practice of religious virtue, not from any passionate and transient emotions, but from the deliberate conviction of his judgment, that a pious and virtuous conduct will be ultimately conducive to his best interest; and though the practice of virtue may occasionally be unpleasant, may require self-denial, and may expose him to difficulties and inconveniencies, which would subdue a resolution inspired only by the passions, they will make little impression upon a purpose which originates in the deliberate conviction of the understanding. And by degrees, habits of rectitude will be insensibly established, and virtue will be loved and practised for its own sake. The religious principle is of too much importance to be made dependent upon the passions, which wise men discard in all affairs of moment, lest they should warp and mislead the judgement.

Mr. W. concludes his section, p. 96, with the application of his doctrine concerning the use of the passions

passions in religion, not, as might naturally have been expected, to the Supreme Being, but to Jesus Christ; whom he represents as "the proper object of love, gratitude, joy, hope, and trust," which he apprehends that no one can deny "without being dead to every generous emotion, and blushing with shame and indignation when he looks his objection in the face." p. 98. Without feeling, however, any emotion, either of fear or shame, from any thing Mr W. has advanced; I make no hesitation to assert, that the affection, which he insists upon as due to Christ, has no just foundation in the representations which the scripture exhibits of his person and character, or of his present state and dignity, but that it originates in palpable error, and is directed wholly to a mere creature of the imagination.

Very far, indeed, am I from desiring or endeavouring to weaken that rational regard to Jesus which he has himself required, and for which the gospel lays a proper foundation. I revere his memory as the most excellent of human characters, and the most eminent of all the prophets of God, who was honoured with the high commission of superseding the mosaic dispensation, and of revealing to all nations "the words of eternal life." I joyfully and thankfully embrace his doctrine, confide in his promise, and bow to his authority. This is all the love which he requires, and which his disciples can properly

properly exercise towards him. "He that hath my "commandments and keepeth them," saith our Lord himself, "he it is that loveth me*;" and who is authorised to substitute any other criterion of acceptable regard?

Jesus is indeed now alive, and, without doubt, employed in offices the most honourable and benevolent: but, as we are totally ignorant of the place where he resides, and of the occupations in which he is engaged, there can be no proper foundation for religious addresses to him, nor of gratitude for favours now received, nor yet of confidence in his future interposition in our behalf. All affections and addresses of this nature are unauthorised by the christian revelation, and are infringements upon the prerogative of God.

If indeed we figure to ourselves a being equal to the Supreme, or next in order and dignity below him; invested by him with the administration of the universe; voluntarily assuming human nature; suffering upon the cross the punishment due to the sins of men; continually employed in interceding for them; supplying them with a perfect righteousness to conceal the defects of their own characters; and guarding and protecting them in their passage through this world; the steady contemplation of this ideal person will naturally generate admiration, gratitude, joy, confidence, and other corresponding

* John xiv. 21.

affections; and all this may be called love to Christ, confidence in him, and the like: and christians who neither experience nor pretend to such ecstatic feelings may be treated with contempt, and represented as derogating from the glory of Christ. But such a Being as this having, in fact, no real existence, all these affections must be vain and illusory, varying according to the variable fancies of men, and incapable of constituting wise and permanent principles of action.

But Mr. W. has texts at hand to support his doctrine, which to superficial readers will probably appear satisfactory, but which a little attention will easily reconcile to the general tenor of the scriptures concerning the person of Jesus, as a man of like faculties and feelings with other human beings.

“In him,” says the Apostle*, “dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.” But this no more proves the proper deity of Christ, which is the purpose for which Mr. W. quotes it, than the expressions, “being filled with all the fulness of God†,” or “being made partakers of a divine nature‡,” prove the proper deity of all sincere christians. The meaning is, that a fulness of knowledge and power for the purpose of his mission was communicated to him by God.

Mr. W. also produces the text, Phil. ii. 6. 8. “He

* Col. ii. 9. † Eph. iii. 19. ‡ 2 Pet. i. 4.

“thought

"thought it not robbery to be equal with God," or rather *as* God or *like* God. The sense of which is, that being endued with miraculous powers, here called "being in the form of God, he did not grasp at similitude to God," did not affect an ostentatious display of these powers for his own advantage; "but, assuming the form of a servant, he was made in the likeness of men," that is, he appeared weak and helpless like another man*, and so "became obedient to death, even the death of the cross." The submission of Jesus to death is represented in the New Testament as an act of voluntary obedience, because he always had it in his power to have rescued himself by miracle, as he himself repeatedly declares; a privilege which no human being but himself ever possessed.

Mr. W. argues the propriety of trusting in Christ, from Heb. xiii. 8. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever." But in this passage the name of the prophet is put, by a usual figure of speech, for his doctrine, as the context evinces. For the inference which the writer immediately draws from the observation is, "Be not carried about with divers and strange doctrines."

I am, Madam, &c.

* So Samson, Judges xvi. 17. tells his mistress, that "if he is shaven he shall become weak, and be like any man," i. e. as our translators (not being, in this instance, warped by prejudice) have properly rendered it, like any *other* man: no longer possessed of extraordinary powers.

LETTER IX.

The same subject continued. Errors concerning the Holy Spirit.

MADAM,

MR. Wilberforce, like a valorous knight, having chased his invisible opponent, page 98, "from his favourite position, and *compelled* him to acknowledge that the religious affections towards our blessed Saviour are not unreasonable," determines now to follow up his victory, and to drive him from "his last retreat, viz. That by the very constitution of our nature we are not susceptible of affections towards an invisible Being."

Our Author having now advanced pretty far into the wilderness of visions and chimeras, it is not an easy matter to follow him over the enchanted ground. To all appearance, however, his present attack is made upon a non-existing adversary. That any person should believe that Jesus Christ is all that Mr. W. represents, that is, a God to whom we are under greater obligations than to the Creator himself, having redeemed us from that miserable state in which our Maker had left us*, and yet to deny that

* Vide Mr. W. p. 123. "The merits and intercession of Christ, to which we are *wholly* indebted for our reconciliation with God, and for the will and the power from first to last to
"work

that this divine person is the proper object of religious affection, or that such affections are practicable, is to me utterly incomprehensible. But as Mr. W. labours the point with so much assiduity, it is to be supposed that he may have met with some reasoners of this extraordinary cast. As for those who are content with the plain and simple account of Jesus Christ in the New Testament, as a man approved of God, it is plain that to such persons the whole of his reasoning is totally inapplicable; nor does he indeed affect to address it to them.

To professed christians, who believe that a Divine Person assumed human nature, and died to save them from eternal misery, and that he is now continually employed to intercede for them and to defend them, and who, nevertheless, doubt whether it be reasonable or practicable to love and confide in him, Mr. W. addresses the argument in his following section. And the tenor of his reasoning is, that invisible beings, when they are made the objects of steady meditation, or, as he quaintly expresses it, when they are brought into "close contact," are capable of exciting the affections—that the relations in which we stand to such a Christ as he describes, have a peculiar tendency to awaken the affections—that it is the office of the holy spirit to excite them—

"work out our own salvation." In our natural state, that is, as God made us, the author describes us as "tainted with sin to the very core," without will or power to help ourselves.

that persons who object to the possibility of such affections have never used the proper means of attaining them—and that many eminent christians, in all ages, have, by the use of the appointed means, made high attainments in these virtues. The only objection which can be made to this reasoning, as an address to men's professed principles, is, that it is proposed to persons who either have no occasion for it, or whose understandings must be impenetrable to argument.

Mr. W. in order to convince his callous believer of the practicability of love to Christ, though invisible, assumes as a fact, p. 101, the extraordinary position, that “there appears naturally to be a certain strangeness between the passion and its object, which familiarity and the power of habit must gradually overcome.” He adds, “You must contrive to bring them into *close contact*.” After which he proceeds, at considerable length, formally to open, as he expresses it, p. 106, “the doctrine of *close contact*,” as though it were some new and important discovery in the philosophy of the human mind—when, in truth, it amounts to nothing more than the old and familiar fact, that the affections are excited, not in proportion to the real value and magnitude of the object, but to the attention, voluntary or otherwise, which is paid to it, and that, whether the object be real or imaginary.

Mr. W. p. 102, to illustrate his proposition that
objects

objects of vision are not the only objects capable of attracting our regard, thinks "that it might appear "to be too nearly approaching to the ludicrous to "suggest, as an example to the contrary, the metaphysician's attachment to his unsubstantial speculations." What there is of ludicrous in those profound speculations, in those acute and successful researches into the phænomena of the human mind, which occupied the active and penetrating genius of a Locke and a Hartley, I am at a loss to discover. This sarcasm upon the sublime and useful science of metaphysics would well become a superficial sciolist, who might hope to conceal his ignorance under the veil of ridicule, but is unworthy of Mr. W. both as a man of liberality and a scholar.

Mr. W. observes, p. 101, "that the distresses of "a novel, which at the same time we know to be "fictitious, affect us more than the dry narrative of "a battle." And it is an obvious fact, that imaginary objects often excite the passions as vividly as real ones, even when known to be imaginary; and much more so, when, by any illusion of the understanding, these creatures of the imagination are mistaken for substantial beings. It is therefore an important branch of the discipline of the mind to distinguish between imaginations and realities, and to fix the attention habitually and firmly upon things which are true and important, lest fictitious objects should

should take possession of the affections, to the exclusion of those which are of substantial value. And this appears to me to be precisely the situation of Mr. W. and of those who think and feel with him. The Jesus whom they array with the attributes of deity, and to whom they delegate the administration of the universe, is a phantom of their own imagination, totally unlike the humble prophet of Nazareth; and all the attention which they give, and the affections which they feel, to such a being, are irrational and illusory; and, as far as they prevail, they derogate from the homage due to the one true God, the only proper object of all religious veneration and gratitude.

Mr. W. tells us (p. 107) that "our blessed Saviour is not removed far from us.—He exhibits not himself to us *dark with excessive brightness*, but is let down as it were to the possibilities of human converse. We may not think that he is incapable of entering into our little concerns, and of sympathizing with them." That is, in other words, that such a being as we fancy Christ to be, is better adapted to our conceptions and affections than God himself. Such is the opinion which the papists entertain of the virgin Mary, and of their calendar saints, with whom they think they may be more familiar than with Jesus Christ himself. Hence the abject superstitions and idolatries of the church of Rome;

Rome; and indeed there is no end to the vagaries of the human mind when it transfers its devout affections to any other being than the living God.

Mr. W. supports his doctrine by a quotation from the epistle to the Hebrews, iv. 15. "He is not one who cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, having been in all points tempted like as we are." How this declaration can be made consistent with Mr. W.'s doctrine of the divinity of Christ, it becomes him seriously to consider. That a God should be "in all points tempted" like frail and sinful man, appears to me a contradiction in terms. But the writer of this epistle, having formally proved that though Christ was superior to all former prophets, he was inferior to angels, and in all respects like to his brethren*, justly concludes, that, having suffered like them, he now sympathizes with them. And no doubt he does; but this fact lays no foundation for religious regards and addresses to him.

From the promise of our Lord to his apostles, John xiv. 18. "I will not leave you *orphans*," Mr. W. strangely draws the universal inference, that "the children of Christ are here separated from the personal view of him, but not from his paternal affection and paternal care." But the virtuous, who are in the hands of God, the God and Father

* See Mr. Wakefield's translation of the two first chapters of this epistle.

of Jesus their Master, need no other protector. And the text quoted will not prove the point, for it is addressed to the apostles only; and our Lord immediately adds, "I will come unto you;" meaning, that he would soon visit them again after his resurrection, for their consolation and triumph. It is added, p. 110, "that we learn from the scriptures, "that it is one main part of the operations of the "Holy Spirit to implant these heavenly principles "in the human mind, and to cherish their growth." But we have before had occasion to remark, that the scriptures do not teach the existence of any such person as the Holy Spirit, and that there is no foundation for the expectation of any supernatural operations upon the mind. Least of all then can it be supposed, that such operations would be exerted to produce affections towards a being who, having no existence out of the imagination, nevertheless supplants the true God in the government of the universe, and in the hearts of his creatures.

In p. 111, we find an eloquent declamation upon the great effects of such a "love to the Redeemer," as Mr. W. recommends; which, he says, "was the "religion of the holy martyrs of the sixteenth century, and which burned with an increase of ardour in proportion to the persecutions with which "they were assailed." And there can be no doubt, that persons who seriously believe that Jesus Christ is such a being as Mr. W. describes, and who have wrought

wrought themselves up to a proportionable elevation of admiration, gratitude, joy, and confidence for his supposed condescensions, labours, and sufferings, and for his present protection, will often feel ecstatic joys and transports; and will, in the ardor of their zeal, cheerfully submit to sufferings and death for the sake of him to whom they imagine themselves under these infinite obligations—Hereby demonstrating, what? not the *truth* of their principles, but the *sincerity* of their persuasion. I grant that many of the martyrs of the sixteenth century thought of Jesus Christ as Mr. W. now does. They were men of great integrity, and inflexible courage in avowing what they believed to be evangelical truth, and in protesting against the extravagant corruptions of the Romish church. But their creed is not our standard. They were just emerging from the prejudices of an ignorant and superstitious age; and though they did as much as could be expected from men in their circumstances, and successfully exposed many of the more flagrant errors of the papal religion, they could not, at once, shake off the mass of corruption which had been accumulating for almost sixteen centuries. They left much to be done by those who came after them. We have as good a right to dissent from their creed, when it is repugnant to the doctrine of the scriptures, as they had to detect and expose the errors of the Romish church. And I trust, if the times should ever require it, that the

advocates for rational and scriptural religion would be as ready, by their sufferings, to testify their zeal for truth, as the honest but less enlightened confessors of an earlier age.

This section is closed with a reproof to nominal christians, p. 113, "for scarcely admitting, except
 "in the most vague and general sense, the doctrine
 "of the influence of the holy spirit;" adding, "that
 "if we look into the holy scriptures for information
 "on this particular we learn a very different lesson."
 To this is subjoined, as usual, a string of texts detached from their connexion, which in *sound* seem to confirm the assumption, but which, when critically examined, bear no such meaning. Most of them relate to the state of the heathen previous to their conversion, and to the wonderful effect of the miraculous powers of the apostles, in exciting their attention to the christian doctrine, and thereby engaging them to the serious profession of christianity. These in their heathen state are represented as
 "children of wrath," and able to do nothing; but convinced by the miracles, and enlightened by the teaching of the apostles, they were "quickened as
 "from the dead, created anew to good works, put
 "off the old man with his deeds, and put on the
 "new man which is renewed after the image of his
 "Creator."

And the unchristianized world being figuratively represented as under the empire of Satan, that is,

of idolatry and vice; when a heathen was converted to the christian religion, he was said to have been "translated out of the kingdom of Satan into that of God's dear Son;" and, conversely, when a professor of christianity, in consequence of immoral conduct, was discarded by the christian community, he was said to "be delivered over to Satan;" that is, he ceased to be a member of the christian church, and was regarded as an unconverted heathen.

It deserves to be particularly remarked here, that Mr. W. p. 113, describes all men as "by nature children of wrath, and under the power of the evil spirit, our understandings being naturally dark, and our hearts averse from spiritual things;" and p. 114, the influence of the holy spirit is represented "as *originally* awakening us from slumber, as quickening us when dead; as delivering us from the power of the devil, and as drawing us to God." Hence it follows, that upon this system mankind can do nothing to extricate themselves from the wretched condition in which they are placed by their Creator, and that all relief must *originate* in the awakening and quickening operations of the holy spirit. And if these are withheld, the hapless victims are inevitably doomed to eternal misery. Yet Mr. W. and many others call this system christianity, and profess to believe that God is just!

In my judgment, language cannot supply words

of sufficient energy to express the odious malignity of character which is here ascribed unjustly, I had almost said profanely, to the Governor of the Universe.

Mr. W. in a note at the conclusion of this section, recommends Dr. Doddridge's sermons on regeneration as a "most valuable compilation." Dr. Doddridge was a man of great industry, ability, benevolence, and piety; but he was greatly misled by an undue attachment to the popular system of theology, and his works are not calculated to instruct his readers in the true sense of the christian scriptures, nor to infuse into them a spirit of rational and manly piety. His sermons upon regeneration assume throughout an erroneous principle; applying expressions to all men indiscriminately, which are limited by the connexion to the contemporaries of the apostles, and to the state of the first converts to the christian faith. And Dr. Doddridge, like Mr. W. contends for that supernatural influence upon the mind for moral purposes, which is neither consistent with true philosophy, with ascertained facts, nor with the genuine doctrine of the christian revelation.

I am,

Madam, &c.

LETTER

L E T T E R X.

Terms of Acceptance with God.

MADAM,

THERE is nothing in the whole compass of religion and morals, of greater importance to be clearly and distinctly known, than "the terms of acceptance with God," or, in other words, the means which God has appointed for the attainment of our ultimate happiness. And these are so explicitly revealed in the scriptures both of the old and new testament, that no person of common understanding, who reads them attentively and without prejudice, can fall into any material error upon this subject. The practice of virtue is always represented as the only means of attaining happiness, both here and hereafter. "To fear God, and keep his commandments; to do justice, to love mercy, to walk humbly with God, to deny all ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live soberly, righteously and godlily in the world; to seek for glory, honour, and immortality, by patient continuance in well doing; in a word, to love God with all the understanding, and with all the heart, and to love our neighbour as ourselves:" these are the clear and equitable terms of salvation, both under the old dispensation and the new.

The apostles indeed insist much on *faith* in Christ: and with great propriety; for their exhortations were usually addressed to unbelieving jews, or to heathen idolaters, whom they were desirous of introducing to the privileges and hopes of the christian religion. But those who already professed christianity are enjoined, not to believe, but to act consistently with their profession, and to be "careful to maintain good works."

The apostles also often dwell upon the *sufferings* of Christ, and that for several reasons. The death of Jesus was the confirmation of his mission; it was the seal of that new covenant which he came to promulgate; it was the necessary preliminary to his resurrection; and the public execution of the founder of this new religion being objected to its professors as an indelible disgrace, the first teachers of christianity were solicitous to shew, that they were not ashamed to avow themselves the disciples of a crucified Master. "They gloried in the cross of Christ, and determined to know nothing but Jesus Christ, even him who was crucified."

After having thus briefly stated the plain and simple doctrine of the scriptures concerning the "terms of acceptance with God," let us now inquire into that of Mr. W. which is indeed of a very different complexion. And confidently as that gentleman asserts it, and dangerous as he represents it, either to dispute, or to mistake, the principles he assumes;

assumes; the fact is, that not a single word, no, not even a trace or a shadow of them, is to be found in the christian scriptures.

That I may not misrepresent his sentiments upon a subject which he regards as of the highest moment, let him speak for himself. After having stated it, p. 117, "as a highly *dangerous* notion, that "some christians, with little more than an indistinct "and nominal reference to him who bore our sins "in his own body upon the tree, really rest their "eternal hopes on a vague general persuasion of "the unqualified mercy of the Supreme Being, or "still more erroneously rely in the main on their "own negative or positive merits;" and having noticed with disapprobation, p. 119, the errors of another "class, who have a sort of general indeterminate and ill understood dependence on our blessed "Saviour; but whose hopes appear ultimately to "bottom on the persuasion that they are now "through Christ become members of a new dispensation, wherein they will be tried by a more lenient "rule than that to which they must have been "otherwise subject," he represents these errors, p. 121, "as naturally resulting from the mistaken "conception entertained of the fundamental principles of christianity, as a scheme for justifying the "ungodly, and for making the *fruits of holiness* the "effects, not the *cause*, of our being justified and reconciled." Among the practical consequences of

these errors, he mentions (p. 123) "their tendency
 "to prevent that deep feeling of gratitude for the
 "merits and intercession of Christ, to which we are
 "wholly indebted for our reconciliation to God;
 "and for the will and the power, from first to last,
 "to work out our own salvation; their proneness to
 "run into merely moral disquisitions, and their ad-
 "vising men to amend their ways, as a preparation
 "for their coming to Christ, rather than exhort
 "them to throw themselves with deep prostration
 "of soul at the foot of the cross." Professing, p. 127,
 "not to enter into the niceties of controversy," he
 nevertheless contends, "that they who in the main
 "believe the doctrines of the church of England
 "are bound to allow, that our dependence on our
 "blessed Saviour, as *alone* the meritorious cause of
 "our acceptance with God, must be not merely
 "formal and nominal, but real and substantial.
 "Repentance towards God, and faith towards our
 "Lord Jesus Christ, was the sum of the apostolical
 "instructions." This faith imports, p. 128, that
 "we must be deeply conscious of our guilt and
 "misery, and penitently fleeing for refuge to the
 "hope set before us; we must found *altogether* on
 "the *merit* of the crucified Redeemer our hopes of
 "escape from deserved punishment, and of deliver-
 "ance from the enslaving power of sin. This must
 "be our first, our last, our only plea. We are to
 "surrender ourselves up to him, to be washed in
 "his

"his blood, to be sanctified by his spirit," and the like.

He adds, p. 129, that "what has been required is
"not the perception of a subtle distinction, but a
"state and condition of heart;" and proceeds, p. 130,
to address those "who are disposed to believe, that
"though, in some obscure and vague sense, the
"death of Christ as the *satisfaction* for our sins, and
"for the *purchase* of our future happiness, and the
"sanctifying influence of the spirit, are to be admit-
"ted as fundamental articles of our creed; yet that
"these are doctrines so much above us, that they
"are not suited to our capacities, and that, turn-
"ing our eyes from these difficult speculations,
"we should fix them on the practical and moral
"precepts of the gospel." To this objection Mr. W.
replies, p. 131, that "this may not be inconsistently
"the language of the modern unitarian, but surely
"it is in the highest degree unreasonable to admit
"into our scheme all the *grand peculiarities* of chris-
"tianity, and, having admitted, to neglect, and
"think no more of them;" that "common sense
"suggests, from their nature and magnitude, that
"they deserve our most serious regard;" that "the
"profane irreverence of this conduct is not more
"striking than its ingratitude;" and "that we are
"forewarned, p. 133, that God will not hold them
"guiltless who are unmindful of his kindness."
The section concludes with an exhortation to exer-

cise those regards to Christ, which correspond with the views which the author has given of the means of salvation by him.

If then I rightly understand Mr. W.'s meaning in stating the terms of our acceptance with God, he includes two particulars: first, that the merits of Christ are an atonement and satisfaction to divine justice for the sins of men, and are alone the meritorious cause of our acceptance with God; and secondly, that it is *necessary to salvation* that men should be apprised of this doctrine, and that, rejecting all reliance on their own negative or positive merits, they should found altogether on the merit of the crucified Redeemer, their hopes of escape from deserved punishment.

Now, if these be really the terms of salvation, it is natural to expect that they would be as distinctly stated, and as clearly defined, in the christian scriptures, as in Mr. W.'s "Practical View." Surely, every page would be filled with exhortations, "to cast ourselves at the foot of the cross," to "rely upon the merits of Christ," and "to place our confidence in the atonement and satisfaction of the crucified Redeemer." What then must be the astonishment of a serious inquirer, who, having formed his ideas of the christian religion from Mr. W.'s treatise, when he came to the perusal of the genuine writings of the apostles and evangelists, should discover that "the merits of Christ" is a phrase

phrase which no where occurs in them*; that the death of Jesus is never represented either as an "atonement for sin," or a "satisfaction to the Deity," whatever may be meant by those obscure and unscriptural expressions; and that we are never exhorted to ask any thing of God "for the sake of Christ," nor is any blessing ever said to be granted to us upon that consideration†! that to "cast ourselves with deep prostration of soul at the foot of the cross," which Mr. W. sets forth as an essential duty, is not once recommended in the whole New Testament; and that no proof can be produced, that faith in Christ means any thing more than "an habitual and practical recognition of his authority;" much less, that it includes "an entire reliance on his merit." Upon all these subjects it is sufficient to say, that the scripture is *totally* silent;

* The "righteousness of Christ" is an expression used in the epistle to the Romans: it should be rendered "justification," and signifies the introducing unbelieving jews, or idolatrous heathens, into the privileges of the gospel. See Locke's Commentary, and Taylor's Key. The imputation of the righteousness of one person to supply the defects of another, is one of those extravagant ideas which never occurred to the writers of the New Testament.

† Eph. iv. 32, may perhaps be regarded as an exception; but that is an acknowledged mis-translation. The true rendering is, even as God, in or by Christ, hath freely forgiven you; that is, has declared by Christ that you are freely forgiven.

Mr. W. himself will not pretend that the language he uses is that of the New Testament. What then is the just and inevitable conclusion? Surely, that these indispensable terms of acceptance, these "*grand peculiarities*" of the gospel, are mere human inventions, and not the doctrines of Christ.

It may perhaps be said, that although the scriptures use not these very words, the same meaning may be conveyed in different language: but surely it is somewhat extraordinary, that an unscriptural phraseology must be invented to express the most essential scripture doctrines, the "*grand peculiarities*" of christianity. This at least fixes a mark of suspicion upon such assumed principles: but the truth is, that the ideas corresponding to these novel phrases are no more to be found in the sacred writings than the phrases themselves, nor had they any existence till some centuries after the apostolic age*.

If we ask for proof, Mr. W. though he delivers his sentiments with the confidence of an oracle, and denounces the vengeance of heaven on all who do not yield implicit credit to them, declines "entering into the niceties of controversy." Here and there indeed he thrusts in a text, which seldom, even in appearance, and never in its true and proper sense, yields the least support to his notion of "an undi-

* See Dr. Priestley's History of the Corruptions of Christianity.

“ vided faith in the Lord Jesus,” or “ an entire reliance upon his merits and satisfaction.”

In a note, however, p. 134, he directs the reader's attention to what he calls “ a few leading arguments.” He appeals to the expression, “ we preach Christ crucified,” and the like, the meaning of which has been already explained: he argues from the institution of the Lord's supper, which is only a solemn commemoration of an interesting event; particularly as, in a figurative sense, the seal of that new covenant, into which God is pleased to enter with all who believe in the divine mission of Jesus; but without any mention of, or allusion to, atonement, satisfaction, or merit. He adds, “ that the sacrament of baptism shadows out our souls being “ washed and purified by the blood of Christ;” a mere gratuitous assertion*, unsupported by any proof. Also, that in the Epistle to the Romans, the apostle speaks “ with the most emphatical expressions, of “ deep and bitter regret, of some who went about “ to establish their own righteousness, and had not “ submitted themselves to the righteousness of God;” which he arbitrarily applies to those “ who satisfy “ themselves with vague general thoughts of our “ Saviour's mediation, and the source of whose habitual complacency is, their being tolerably well

* St. Peter, 1 Pet. iii. 21, teaches, that baptism is emblematical, not “ of being washed in the blood of Christ,” but of a good conscience towards God.

“satisfied with their own characters and conduct;” a notion the most distant from the apostle’s mind, and utterly inconsistent with his reasoning in the context. He is there speaking of the Jews, who adhered to the rites and ceremonies of pharisaic tradition, in preference to the liberal dispensation of the gospel, and thereby excluded themselves from its privileges and hopes *.”

Lastly, he appeals to the Epistle to the Galatians, and strangely supposes, “that the great defect of the judaizing christians, which frustrated the grace of God, and debarred them from all the benefits of the death of Jesus, was not *immorality*, but their being disposed to trust in *part*, for their acceptance with God, to the mosaic institutions, *instead of reposing wholly on the merits of Christ.*” This is *making scripture with a witness*. Let Mr. W. produce, if he can, a single sentence from the writings of Paul, in which that venerable servant and messenger of Jesus requires a reliance, either wholly or in part, upon the merits of Christ: much less will he be able to discover any passage in which the apostle represents this reliance upon another’s merits as so essential to salvation, that, without it, no moral excellence in their own character will be available. The apostle’s design, from the beginning to the end of this epistle, is to shew, that men who rested their hopes of salvation upon the practice of

* See Locke and Taylor on the passage.

burdensome pharisaic rites, and who imposed them upon others, excluded themselves from the liberal provisions of the gospel; which requires nothing but such a faith in Christ and his doctrine, as will influence men to the practice of universal virtue.

Mr. W. p. 124, censures some whom he calls "*nominal christians*," for "advising sinners to amend their ways as a preparative for their coming to Christ, rather than exhort them to throw themselves with deep prostration at the foot of the crosses." He does not seem to have recollected, that the advice of the apostle Peter, Acts iii. 13. to men in similar circumstances, and even to the actual murderers of Jesus, was, "Repent, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out." But perhaps St. Peter was "a nominal christian," and "ignorant of the gospel;" and, truly, it is more than probable that he was totally ignorant of the gospel of Mr. W. At any rate, it is safer and better, in a case of such moment, to follow the advice and example of an apostle, than to adopt the unscriptural jargon of modern systems, which, whatever appearance of humility and sanctity it may assume, when it is thoroughly examined, will be found to convey as little meaning as "the sounding brass, or the tinkling cymbal."

I am, Madam, &c.

LETTER

L E T T E R X I.

Strictness of practical Christianity. Rational Religion not unfavourable to Virtue. Observations on Christian Idolatry.

MADAM,

I SO much approve of the general strain of what Mr. Wilberforce advances upon "the strictness of true practical christianity," in the first section of his fourth chapter, that I am sorry to meet with any thing from which I am obliged to dissent, and still more that any remarks should have escaped from his pen which are open to just animadversion.

I entirely agree with Mr. W. p. 147, "That it is the grand essential practical characteristic of true christians, that they have renounced and abjured all other masters, and have cordially and unreservedly devoted themselves to God;"—that this, p. 148, "must be the master principle to which every other must be subordinate;"—that "they deliberately purpose, that, so far as they may be able, the grand governing maxim of their future lives shall be, to do all to the glory of God;"—that, p. 150, "the example of Christ is their pattern, and the word of God their rule;"—that "their determination to obey the will, and to cultivate the favour of God, hath its foundations in a deep

"deep and humiliating sense of his exalted majesty
"and infinite power;"—but, p. 151, that "these aw-
"ful impressions are relieved and ennobled by an ad-
"miring sense of the infinite perfections and infinite
"amiableness of the divine character, animated by
"a confiding though humble hope of his fatherly
"kindness and protection, and quickened by the
"grateful recollection of immense and continually
"increasing obligations. This is the christian love
"of God; a love compounded of admiration, of
"preference, of hope, of trust, of joy, chastised by
"reverential awe, and wakeful with continual gra-
"titude."

I confess that, when I read this just and animating account of the affection due from all his creatures to the Supreme Being, I can hardly believe it was written by the same author, who a few pages before has represented the same Being as having brought his creatures into existence "radically
"tainted with sin," and as having left the great majority of them to perish, in hopeless and eternal misery. To such a God as this, some persons may, for aught I know, experience "a love compounded
"of admiration, preference, hope, trust, and joy"—the only sensation that I could feel respecting him, if such were my idea of the divine character, would be that of terror and abhorrence.

But I have no doubt that God is really worthy, in the highest degree, of those affections which are
here

here so eloquently described; for he is infinitely wise and good, and is incapable of acting unjustly by any of his creatures. "His tender mercy is over all his works."

Our author prudently, or rather inadvertently, declines to combine the different parts of his system; and while he overlooks the injustice of leaving the great mass of mankind to suffer eternal torments, he insists wholly upon the goodness of God to the chosen few, who are regenerated by the influences of his spirit, and who certainly have no reason to complain. But the character of a Being so capricious and malignant, whatever partial kindness he may occasionally manifest, can never be the object of rational veneration and confidence.

Mr. W. does not see this consequence, which to many others appears so obvious and palpable. Nay, he even thinks, that the system which he has stated lays a proper foundation for that love to God which the gospel requires as the most powerful principle of virtue. And he very unjustly, and I must say uncandidly, charges christians whose principles do not reach his own standard of orthodoxy, with a design to lower the standard of christian morality. "They," says he, p. 139, "who hold the fundamental doctrines of scripture" (that is, his own unscriptural opinions) "in their due force, hold also in its due degree of purity the practical system which scripture inculcates. But they who explain away the
"former"

"former" (that is, who do not think with the author) "soften down the latter also, and reduce it to the level of their own defective scheme. It is not from any confidence in the superior amount of their own performances, or in the greater vigour of their own exertions, that they reconcile themselves to their low views of the satisfaction of Christ, and of the influence of the spirit; but it should rather seem their plan so to depress the required standard of practice that no man need fall short of it, that no superior aid can be wanted for enabling us to attain to it. It happens, however, with respect to their simple method of morality, as in the case of the short ways to knowledge, of which some vain pretenders have vaunted, that these have failed of conducting them to the right object, and have issued only in ignorance and conceit."

I am sorry to observe, that this is a very illiberal paragraph, which I hope that Mr. W. will, upon reconsideration, retract. Let him recollect that we, who reject his pretended fundamentals as unscriptural and untrue, have an equal right to charge him with a design to subvert the foundations of virtue, and "to depress the required standard of practice." But I trust we are too well acquainted with the spirit of christianity to retort the charge upon our uncandid assailant. We can give him credit for writing from the best motives, and with an earnest desire

desire to promote practical religion, while we think him greatly mistaken in the means he adopts for this purpose. Mr. W. may be assured that we, who reprobate the doctrines of original depravity, of the pre-existence, the deity, and the satisfaction, as it is called, of Christ, and of the supernatural influences of the spirit, as gross corruptions of the christian religion, set the standard of christian morality as high as he himself can do. We contend with equal earnestness for the practice of universal virtue, and for perfection of character: and what more can be required? It is true, that when the virtues are considered in detail, Mr. W. may insist upon certain regards as due to Christ, which we may think unscriptural and idolatrous, and may lay, what we esteem, an undue stress upon ritual institutions; but he has no more right to condemn our morality for this diversity of opinion and practice, than a papist has to censure him, for not worshipping the virgin Mary, nor observing the festivals of the saints. And we feel ourselves as little hurt by his unjust animadversions, as he himself would be by those of the honest, but ignorant, catholic. Love is, with us, the fulfilling of the law; and the habitual practice of virtue, from a principle of love to God and benevolence to man, is, in our judgement, the sum and substance of christian morality.

The doctrine of Unitarian christians lays the best foundation for love to God, because it represents

sents the character of the Deity as perfectly wise, benevolent, and impartial, ever pursuing the best ends, the virtue and happiness of all his intelligent offspring, by the best and most efficacious means. Hence he appears to be the proper object of complacency, gratitude, confidence, resignation, and joy; and a steady faith in the existence and government of such a Being is a perpetual source of satisfaction and delight to every well disposed mind. But the God of Mr. W.'s system is a gloomy and capricious tyrant, whose chief employment, and therefore delight, is to render his creatures miserable. How is it then possible to venerate and love him?

The love of Christ, upon this system, must very much interfere with the love of God. To say the least, the idea of this stupendous person, this second God, divides and distracts the attention, and occupies that space in the mind which is the sole property of God himself, the only invisible Being of whose continual presence with us we have any satisfactory evidence, who is therefore the only proper object of our religious regards, and whose idea is at all times sufficient to occupy and fill the mind. The notion of two infinite Beings is utterly beyond the comprehension of the human intellect; and indeed, as Locke and Wollaston* have justly observed, these two ideas must necessarily coincide, and coalesce into one. But the Father and the Son are commonly

* Religion of Nature, p. 70. Locke's Fam. Letters, p. 412.

represented as distinct Beings, of different and even opposite characters; the Father stern, severe, and inflexible; the Son all gentleness and compassion, submitting to bear his Father's wrath, and to appease his anger, by substituting himself in the stead of the sinner*. It is impossible to regard these two characters with equal affection, and the love of the imaginary Christ robs the living and true God of his honour and homage.

Mr. W. observes, p. 156, that God "will not accept of a *divided* affection;" and again, p. 157, "idolatry is the crime against which God's highest resentment is expressed, and his severest punishment denounced." Also, that "it is not in bowing the knee to idols that idolatry consists, so much as in the internal homage of the heart, as in the feeling towards them of any of that supreme love, or reverence, or gratitude, which God

* This observation is exemplified in the following stanzas from one of Dr. Watts's hymns :

"Once 'twas a feat of dreadful wrath,

"And shot devouring flame;

"Our God appear'd consuming fire,

"And *Vengeance* was his name.

"Rich were the drops of Jesus' blood

"That calm'd his frowning face,

"That sprinkled o'er the burning throne,

"And turn'd the wrath to grace.

"The

"God reserves to himself as his own exclusive prerogative. On the same principle, whatever else draws off the heart from him engrosses our prime regard, and holds the chief place in our esteem and affection, that, in the estimation of reason, is no less an idol to us than an image of wood or stone would be, before which we should fall down and worship." What then, upon these principles, must we say of that affection and regard which Mr. W. and those who think with him, pay to the imaginary person to whom they ascribe the attributes of divinity, and who is to such a degree the rival of the true and living God in their affections? Mr. W. has himself pronounced it to be idolatry: and according to his representation of the case, his own state, and that of many others, would be dangerous in the extreme. But, in this instance, he happily mistakes the meaning of the scripture denunciations. The idolatry there reprobated, and against which the severest judgements are threat-

"The peaceful gates of heav'nly bliss

"Are open'd by the Son, &c."

How naturally and justly does the conclusion follow:

"To thee *ten thousand* thanks we bring,

"Great Advocate on high,

"And *glory* to th' eternal King

"Who lays his *fury* by."

Thus it is that a phantom of the imagination usurps the honours of the living God.

ened,

ened, is the heathen idolatry, which authorised and often required the most atrocious crimes, christian idolatry *, or the worship of the Son and Spirit together with the Father, had not then an existence: and though it is much to be censured and lamented, and carefully to be avoided; yet, as it is not productive of similar immoralities, it is not liable to the same condemnation. And I doubt not that the error, gross and pernicious as it is, will in many instances be set down to the account of human frailty, and mercifully overlooked by that gracious Being, who is acquainted with the powerful influence of early prejudices, and of fixed habits of thinking, over the most upright and ingenuous minds. While, therefore, I feel it to be an indispensable duty to bear my public testimony against the worship of Jesus Christ as dishonourable to God, injurious to rational religion, and as in a strict sense *idolatrous*, I entertain a high respect for the piety and integrity of many of my fellow-christians, who, in consequence of early and strongly riveted prepossessions, conscientiously practise it; and who no doubt think me guilty of little less than blasphemy, or atheism, in opposing it.

I am, Madam, &c.

* See Mr. Lindsey's admirable *Conversations on Christian Idolatry*, printed 1792; particularly the latter part of the third day's Conversation, p. 80. 87.

L E T T E R XII.

Practice of nominal christians. Theory of religious affections. The christian sabbath.

MADAM,

MR. Wilberforce having in the last section "endeavoured to ascertain the essential character of "true practical christianity," proceeds, sect. 2, "to investigate in detail the practical system of the "bulk of professed christians among ourselves." And here he seems to have drawn a faithful portrait of many persons, who, professing to be christians, complying with the external forms of religion, and abstaining from gross vices, flatter themselves that they have fulfilled the requisitions of the christian law, while their hearts are devoted to "the love of ease, of dissipation, of pleasure, of pomp and parade, of wealth and ambition, of the pleasures of taste and imagination, of science and literature, of reputation," and the like. And where any of these are made the primary object of pursuit, in preference to the love of God and the practice of duty, it must be allowed that the character falls short of the standard of the gospel. It is also much to be feared, that a great part of the christian world come under this description, and that many are in circumstances of extreme danger who flatter them-

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selves

selves that they are perfectly secure. Indeed, considering the influence of self-love, and the dangerous consequences of self-deception, it is the part of true wisdom to be always vigilant, and to admit no principle of action which will not bear the severest examination. Christianity suffers not its professors to rest satisfied in any thing short of perfection of character, and he is certainly not a real christian who does not aspire after it.

It is however wise to guard against superstitious fears. We think most rationally of God when we view him under the relation of a Father, whose sole design is the welfare of his offspring, and who imposes no hard and unreasonable service. We cannot injure his character more than by conceiving of him as an austere and rigorous master, continually laying snares to entangle his servants, and ever on the watch to punish with undue severity the least deviation from duty. We are sure that we please him best, when our conduct is most conducive to our own and others' happiness. And if this be our habitual character, we need be under no apprehension with respect to our final acceptance.

In a true christian, the love of God, and devotedness to him, is the governing principle of action. But we cannot always be expressly thinking upon God; and a virtuous man is performing his duty to the Supreme Being, as really, and as acceptably, when he is pursuing the proper business of life, or
even

even when enjoying its innocent and decent amusements, as when he is offering direct addresses to him in the closet, or in the temple*.

The observation, p. 191, that "heavenly things" are stated in scripture as recommending themselves to the feelings of the true christian, by "being suited to the renewed dispositions of his heart," is the language of the theory which represents religion as the "supernatural implantation of a new principle," p. 162. The truth is, that religion consists, as the author himself elsewhere observes, p. 184, in "habits of mind." And there is no reason to think that religious habits are formed differently from other habits, which are known to be the result of frequent acts. A habit of devotion is neither instinctive nor supernaturally infused; it is generated by frequent exercises of religious worship and contemplation; and a habit of doing good, by acts of beneficence.

Many writers upon morals, and amongst them our author, express themselves inaccurately concerning the love of virtue; as though virtue could have no existence where it is not practised for its own sake. This is tantamount to affirming, that virtue cannot exist but in its most perfect state. Virtue must always be approved by the understanding, but the practice of it is not always originally

* For God is paid when man receives:

To enjoy is to obey. POPE.

pleasing. A vicious man begins to forsake his criminal courses from a conviction of their folly and danger. He enters upon the path of virtue from a sense of duty or of interest, not without some degree of reluctance. By degrees difficulties subside, and uneasinesses vanish. That which was originally indifferent, or disagreeable, becomes tolerable and pleasant; he begins to love virtue for its own sake, and pursues the path of rectitude, not so much on account of the end to which it leads, as for the pleasure he finds in it. The beginnings of virtue are often painful, especially when habits of vice have been previously contracted. And it is neither just nor wise to maintain, that there can be no virtue without a disinterested love of it. It tends to discourage attempts at reformation in those who are desirous of forsaking their vices, and of becoming truly virtuous and religious. This may be a consideration of little weight in the estimation of persons who expect no change of character without an "*original*" supernatural impulse. But they who look only to the operation of natural and moral causes, for natural and moral effects, will rather choose to represent abstinence from vice, from a sense of duty and interest, as a considerable advance towards a virtuous character; and the love of virtue, though not at first perceptible, as gradually growing from the habitual practice of it.

"Let no man judge you," says the apostle,

Col. ii. 16, "in respect to the sabbath day;" that is, Regard no man's censure for not observing the sabbath. "One man," says the same authorised teacher, Rom. xiv. 5, "esteemeth one day above another; another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind," or, as Dr. Doddridge renders it, "let every man freely enjoy his own sentiment." Such is the apostolic canon: and the ground of it is, that christians who differed in these points were equally influenced by the same principle, namely, regard to the authority of Christ; and therefore were equally acceptable to God. "He that regardeth the day regardeth it to the Lord, and he that disregardeth the day disregardeth it to the Lord."

This is the decision of St. Paul: how different from that of Mr. W. who, p. 193, in contradiction to the apostle's rule, directs men to judge of their sincerity and proficiency in religion, by the pleasure they take in the sabbatical observance of the first day of the week, and who pronounces, p. 199, a severe sentence upon those who do not think it necessary to observe the Sunday with that strictness and severity which neither Jesus nor his apostles, but a mistaken spirit of devotion, has imposed, and with which, it tells us, "we ought to be delighted." "All these artifices," says Mr. W. p. 198, (referring particularly to family parties, where neither music

nor cards are introduced) "whatever they may be,
 "to unhallow the Sunday, and to change its charac-
 "ter, it might be almost said to relax its horrors,
 "prove but too plainly that the worship of God is
 "with us a constrained and not a willing service,
 "which we are glad therefore to abridge, though
 "we dare not omit it." He adds, concerning the
 same description of persons, that is, those who do
 not approve and take pleasure in that rigid observa-
 tion of the day which he is pleased to prescribe,
 "that such persons voluntarily acquiesce in a state
 "of mind which is directly contrary to the positive
 "commands of God, which forms a perfect contrast
 "to the representations given us in scripture of the
 "christian character, and accords but too faithfully,
 "in one leading feature, with the character of those
 "who are stated to be the objects of divine dis-
 "pleasure in this life, and of divine punishment in
 "the next."

Such is the uncharitable censure of Mr. W. in a
 case which St. Paul having explicitly stated, has
 clearly decided that every one should freely enjoy his
 own opinion. And such is the narrow spirit univer-
 sally generated, where will-worship and ritual ob-
 servances are set upon a level with practical religion,
 or substituted in its place. Warned by the apostle,
 I presume not to condemn any man for his sabbatical
 observation of the first day of the week. But zealous
 for

for the liberty with which Christ hath made us free, and regarding (as the apostle recommends*) no man's censures for not observing the sabbath day, I have no hesitation in asserting, that under the christian dispensation "every day is alike." Of public worship I am a sincere advocate; and it having been the uniform practice of the christian church to assemble for this purpose on the first day of the week, I highly approve of the continuance of this laudable and useful custom. But that under the christian dispensation one day is more holy than another†, or that any employment, or any amusement, which is lawful on other days, is unlawful on the Sunday, can never be proved either from the christian scriptures or from ecclesiastical antiquity. Nor is it necessary. The christian law expressly requires, not that a seventh part only, but that the whole of our time, and every action of life, should be devoted to the service of God, and that, "whether we eat or drink, or whatever we do, we should do all to his glory." So that to a true christian every day is a sabbath, and every employment is an act of devotion.

Mr. W. may perhaps not unprofitably pass the first day of the week in the manner which he has

* See p. 100, 101.

† See upon this subject the controversy between Mr. Evanson and Dr. Priestley, where this subject is fully discussed, and brought to a proper issue.

prescribed ; but every body cannot do it. The mind grows weary by constant attention to intellectual objects, and requires relaxation on the Sunday as well as on other days. And to the generality of christians, sincere as well as nominal, who cannot keep up their attention to religion through the whole day, and are superstitiously fearful of diverting their thoughts to any other subject, " the Sunday is, to say the best of it, p. 196, a heavy day, " and that larger part of it which is not claimed by " the public offices of the church, dully draws on " in comfortless vacuity," as many have experienced whose moral character is in no respect inferior to theirs, whose minds are capable of a greater intensity of application, and their passions of being kept longer in a state of religious effervescence.

That the laws of any country should enjoin a sabbatism which God has not required, appears to me unreasonable and unjust. How far it may be prudent or decent to " violate such laws" when made, is a different question; but Mr. W. has no right to represent a neglect of such arbitrary human institutions as " an insult upon religion." p. 196.

This sabbatical spirit and these ritual practices are very improperly and unwarrantably represented, p. 99, as " essential constituents of a devotional " frame." This is another instance of that narrow and censorious spirit which is generated by too great an attachment to the forms of religion. A man
who

who goes to church four times a day, commonly thinks himself a better christian than he who is contented with three services only; who in his turn triumphs in his spiritual superiority over the man that satisfies himself with two; while the latter, if not more than usually charitable, regards his christian brother who goes but once, as little better than a heathen.

It is obvious, that laying an undue stress upon the observation of the sabbath, naturally tends to introduce the spirit which in the beginning of the section I have now reviewed is so justly condemned. Many who are so very religious on a Sunday, are too apt to lay aside religion for the rest of the week. They often put it off with their Sunday clothes. They "have paid their tithes, p. 163, say rather their composition, the demands of the church are satisfied, and they may surely be permitted to enjoy what she has left, without molestation or interference."

I am, Madam, &c.

L E T T E R XIII.

Concerning the desire of applause, and whether amiable tempers and useful lives constitute the whole of religion.

MADAM,

I MUCH approve of what Mr. Wilberforce has advanced, sect. 3, "upon the desire of human estimation and applause;" a subject which he has treated with judgment and eloquence, and which he has well discussed both as a philosopher and as a christian. Nothing is more grateful to an ingenuous mind than the approbation of the wise and good, when it comes unsought for, in the upright and disinterested discharge of duty. But applause ought never to be made explicitly, much less primarily, the object of pursuit. The desire of applause not only vitiates the motive, but usually defeats its own end: for praise is invariably withheld whenever the love of praise appears to be the predominant principle; and the only just, and indeed the most effectual, way to attain a good reputation is to deserve it.

In religion especially, the opinion of the world is the last consideration which ought to influence the mind. No man is worthy of the name of christian, much less can he attain to any honourable distinction

tion in his profession, if he is not prepared fearlessly to seek after and avow christian truth, and to live in the habitual discharge of christian duty, equally unmoved by the profane scorn of some, and the bitter and unfounded censures of others. "Never to be ashamed of Christ and of his words," is a principle which must be deeply engraved on the hearts of all who are ambitious of the character of his genuine and approved disciples.

Mr. W. in his next section, p. 246, professes to "state and confute the generally prevailing error of "substituting amiable tempers and useful lives in "the place of religion;" and he introduces many good remarks, blended however with some inaccuracies arising from his inattention to the origin and progress of the affections.

He begins with observing, that "the error in "question is that of exaggerating the merit of certain amiable and useful qualities, and of considering them as of themselves sufficient to compensate "for the want of the supreme love and fear of "God." He states with great propriety and impartiality "the common language upon this head," p. 247. He remarks, p. 248, "that a fatal distinction is thus admitted between morality and religion," which he justly calls "a great and desperate error." He argues, p. 249, "that the moral "worth of these benevolent tempers and useful lives "is apt to be greatly over-rated." He observes,

that "there are many false pretenders to these amiable qualities;" and maintains, p. 250, that "when the benevolent qualities are genuine, they often deserve the name rather of amiable instincts than moral virtues;" and again, p. 251, that "when they are not grounded and rooted in religion, their duration is short and precarious," and "that they often terminate in cruelty and misanthropy," p. 254. He gives little credit, p. 255, "for intrinsic worth to useful lives, independent of religious principles." He observes, p. 256, that these qualities, however excellent, "could in no degree be admitted as a compensation for the want of the supreme fear and love of God;" nor, p. 258, "can it by any means be allowed, that in performing their duties towards their fellow-creatures they perform those to God virtually and substantially, if not in name." That these qualities, p. 261, "so far from being perfect in their nature, are radically defective and corrupt; that no practice will be admitted as christian, but that which flows from christian principles;" and that the true christian, p. 263, is "really the most amiable and useful character." He administers, p. 265, very suitable admonitions to christians upon these heads, both to the "naturally sweet-tempered and active," p. 266, and "to the naturally rough and austere," p. 267, and suggests excellent advice to the latter, p. 270, "for acquiring a gentle and benevolent spirit."

"spirit." Mr. W. farther remarks, p. 272, "that
"persons of amiable tempers and useful lives have
"indeed their reward, being always beloved in pri-
"vate, and generally respected in public, life. But
"when devoid of religion, if the word of God be
"not a fable, they cannot enter into the kingdom of
"heaven." He afterwards proceeds, p. 274, to
warn christians "of the danger to which they are
"exposed of insensibly losing, in the business and
"bustle of the world, the right principles with
"which they set out, and their relish for the em-
"ployments and offices of religion;" and he con-
cludes his section with "offering advice," in the
main just and useful, to such "as suspect this to be
"their case;" adding some proper animadversion
upon the principles of Rousseau and Sterne, p. 282.

Not being an advocate for the doctrine of in-
stinctive principles, I can by no means coincide in
the declaration, p. 250. "that where the benevolent
"qualities are genuine, they often deserve the name
"rather of amiable instincts than moral virtues."
Least of all can I admit, that "the qualities under
"consideration are radically defective and corrupt,
"that they are a body without a soul." This asser-
tion originates in the erroneous opinion, that human
nature is "radically tainted with sin," and is as un-
founded as the doctrine upon which it rests. Bene-
volence is generated, like every other affection, by
the circumstances in which men are placed, and
the

the impressions to which they are exposed. No man is benevolent by instinct, any more than he is by instinct a musician, a philosopher, or a scholar.

Also, benevolence, in whatever way acquired, is a moral excellence. It is not essential to moral rectitude that there should be a mental conflict, or previous discipline; otherwise, it could not be an attribute of Deity. The virtue of an affection consists wholly in its beneficial tendency, and benevolence is as much a moral excellence in the Supreme Being, in whom it exists by necessity*, as it is in man, in whom it is the effect of mental discipline. Hence it follows, that, if it were even instinctive, it would not on that account be less virtuous: and if benevolence could exist as pure, fixed, and efficacious, without religion as with it, its moral value would be the same. But the truth is, that in the present state of things, benevolence meets with so many powerful checks, that the principles of religion are its only effectual support; and nothing but a strong sense of duty to God will induce men to persevere in doing good to their fellow creatures, in opposition to ingratitude, calumny, disappointment, and other considerations, which discourage and over-rule that benevolence which is not founded upon piety, and often, as is justly observed, p. 254,

* If angels are what they are generally supposed to be, their virtues must be instinctive; but are they not therefore moral qualities?

“convert a generous and beneficent youth, as he
“advances in life, into a hard and cruel tyrant, or
“into a cold, sour, and silent misanthrope.”

It is, however, perfectly true, p. 257, “that benevolence and usefulness can in no degree be admitted as a compensation for the want of the
“supreme love and fear of God, and that religion
“suffers not any such composition of duties.” It is essential to the perfect happiness of man, that he should entertain right sentiments of his Maker, and right affections towards him; without which, he will seldom feel motives sufficiently powerful to produce the uniform practice of the social and personal virtues. But whatever virtues may adorn the mind, so long as the love of God is absent, the character is deficient in its most essential excellence, and happiness must be proportionably incomplete.

What punishment may await those, if any such there be, who, being perfect in the duties of benevolence and self-government, are destitute of right affections to the Supreme Being, it is difficult to ascertain. Mr. W. himself expresses his sentiments upon this subject with more than usual caution, p. 272, “if the word of God be not a fable, they
“cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven.” One thing is certain. Before such persons can be finally happy, they must undergo that discipline, whatever it be, which may be necessary to generate supreme
love,

love to God, and entire devotedness to his will. At any rate, it is the wisdom of all to use their utmost endeavours to combine godliness with brotherly kindness and charity, that they may not be wanting in any of those qualifications which the gospel requires as essential to an interest in its blessings.

In p. 267, we find some excellent directions for those who "are conscious that they are naturally rough and austere." Amongst other things, they are advised "to force themselves to abound in offices of courtesy and kindness." This is the true way of producing the habit of benevolence; and they who act thus from a sense of duty to God are acting a wise and virtuous part, and with steady perseverance they shall eventually succeed. Mr. W. surely must have forgotten himself, when, p. 263, he represents certain actions which flow, as he expresses it, "from a cold sense of duty," as "robbed of their vital spirit, and thereby so debased and degraded in our estimation, as to become not barely lifeless and uninteresting, but even distasteful and loathsome." Before moral affections are generated in the mind, the sense of duty is the only efficacious stimulus to those actions which will in the end produce the moral habit. It must be allowed, that actions so circumstanced indicate imperfection in the agent, and are not so intrinsically excellent as when they proceed from a fixed principle of disinterested

terested virtue. But surely it is going much too far to affirm that actions "flowing from a sense of duty" are degraded, distasteful, and loathsome."

The language is certainly incorrect, and the author cannot mean what his words seem to express.

I am, Madam, &c.

LETTER XIV.

Observations upon what Mr. W. calls other grand defects in the practical system of nominal christians.

MADAM,

IN his succeeding section, p. 285, Mr. Wilberforce animadverts upon "some other grand defects in the "practical system of the bulk of nominal christians." Those which he here specifies are "the inadequate "ideas which they entertain of the guilt and evil of "sin," "their inadequate fear of God," "their "inadequate sense of the difficulty of getting to "heaven," "their allowed defectiveness in the love "of God," and likewise "in what regards the love "of their fellow creatures."

This section contains many excellent observations, that merit the serious attention of all sincere professors of religion. The standard of christian morals is indeed set so high that few can hope to reach

reach it; but I do not know that it ought on that account to be disapproved. When we consider what reason, and revelation both, require as essential to perfection, and consequently to happiness, and compare the standard with the actually existing human character, it may justly excite alarming apprehensions in the minds even of the most virtuous men. The most enlarged charity can hardly expect the *immediate* salvation of the great mass of mankind, and men whose characters approach the nearest to perfection, can seldom attain more than a cheerful preponderant hope, not unalloyed with some anxious fear: and perhaps this may be the best and most useful state of mind, to frail and erring creatures, in a course of probation. In this state of things, nothing affords greater relief than the hope which philosophy, enlightened by revelation, affords, of an ultimate purification and renovation of all things. The doctrine of the future annihilation of the great majority of mankind, and much more of their eternal torment, is such as must overcast a benevolent and feeling mind with deep and habitual gloom.

To prove that "the bulk of nominal christians have a most inadequate idea of the guilt and evil of sin," it is alleged, p. 286, that "the guilt of actions is estimated not by the proportion in which according to scripture they are offensive to God; but by that in which they are injurious to society." Men in a social state naturally animadvert

advert with the greatest severity upon those vices which are most immediately injurious to them, and which tend to the dissolution of society itself. Hence they acquire a habit, I will not say, of over-rating the social virtues, but rather of under-rating the rest. It is indeed too obvious, that piety and self-government, in other words the divine and personal virtues, are of little value in the estimation of many who call themselves christians.

It is properly remarked, p. 290, that "the slight notions which many entertain of the evil of sin, discover an utter want of all suitable reverence for the Divine Majesty." The fear of God is indeed justly termed in scripture the beginning of wisdom. It is produced by the serious contemplation of the infinitude of the divine power, wisdom, and greatness; by the consideration of the evils which are permitted under the divine government; by the experience of sufferings; by the denunciations of scripture; and the consciousness of guilt.

This principle alone would overwhelm the mind, and produce continual dejection, if it were not blended and tempered with cheerful confidence in the infinite goodness of God, which softens it down to that reverential awe of the divine majesty, which is the greatest restraint upon all vicious practices and affections.

Mr. W. p. 290, representing the fear of God as a principle in which "nominal christians are greatly
7 "deficient

“deficient,” as a proof of it mentions “their slight notions of the guilt and evil of sin;” and hence he takes occasion to speak of the justice of the punishment denounced against sin as “rebellion against the sovereignty of God,” and observes, that “worlds upon worlds surround us, all probably full of intelligent creatures, to whom, now or hereafter, we may be a spectacle, and afford an example of the divine procedure.” But this is a consideration wholly imaginary, and therefore unworthy of notice in a discussion of such high importance. It is enough that God has declared, and that the reason of the thing demonstrates, that the wicked shall suffer adequate punishment.

As little occasion is there for the succeeding argument, from which we are told, p. 292, “that the awful denunciations of the future punishment of sin derive additional weight,” viz. that they “are represented as resulting from certain connexions and relations, which render them suitable and becoming.” This is explained by remarking that “the righteous belong to the kingdom of God, and the wicked to the kingdom of Satan; they are his children, his servants; they do his works, and at length shall partake his portion, when the merciful Saviour shall be changed into an avenging Judge, and shall pronounce that dreadful sentence, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire prepared for the Devil and his angels.”

The

The Devil, or Satan, not being a real but an allegorical or mythological person, the punishment of the wicked cannot, in strict propriety, be owing to the relation in which they stand to him; but they suffer justly in consequence of those vices, by which they are figuratively classed amongst the subjects of that allegorical being, who is represented as sharing with the Deity in the government of the world, and whose empire comprehends the unbelieving and the vicious portion of the human race.

Mr. W. in discoursing, p. 214, upon "the inadequate conception of the difficulty of becoming true christians," remarks, that "the general notion appears to be, that we are *born* christians. We do not therefore look out for positive evidence of our really being of that number; but, putting the *onus probandi* on the wrong side, we conceive ourselves such of *course*, except our title be disproved by positive evidence to the contrary."

That we are born christians, is a position as erroneous as that we are born sinners. But it may be truly affirmed of persons who have been educated in christian principles and virtuous habits, that "they are christians of course till their title be disproved by positive evidence to the contrary;" that is, till they have contracted habits of vice, from which many have all their lifetime been preserved, who have had the happiness of being placed in circumstances

cumstances favourable to moral improvement, and in which they have not been exposed to temptations beyond their strength.

It is observed, p. 298, that "in the language of scripture christianity is not a geographical but a moral term. It is the possession of a *peculiar nature*, with the qualities and properties which belong to it. It is a state into which we are not *born*, but into which we must be *translated*; a nature which we do not *inherit*, but into which we are to be *created* anew."

The Creator is here represented, as usual, as having placed his human offspring in circumstances the most deplorable, from which they cannot escape but by a new creation, and the attainment of a new nature. For this, it is added, "we must be indebted to the undeserved grace of God, which is promised to our use of the appointed means." But of what avail is this promise, since we are naturally unable to make use of the means prescribed? And where is the grace, or even the justice, of first placing men in a state in which they are utterly incapable of every virtuous exertion, and then requiring such exertions, and promising assistance to them? It is amazing that a person of Mr. W.'s understanding can be satisfied with such gross misrepresentations of the Divine character, which cannot but excite the grief and indignation of every well-informed and well-disposed mind.

Nor

Nor can it by any means be admitted that "christianity is the possession of a peculiar nature, with the qualities and properties which belong to it." True christianity is no such thing. It is a system of habits and affections, generated by a correspondent mental discipline. And those mystical representations of religion, which lead men to expect a supernatural change of the principles and affections, as they are inconsistent with true philosophy, and unfounded in genuine christianity, so they are also unfavourable to good morals, as they encourage enthusiasm, and lead men to judge of their state from certain inexplicable feelings, and rapturous emotions, rather than from habit and character, which tends to puff up with vanity men of little knowledge and warm passions, while it discourages the truly virtuous, humble, and sincere.

We are told, p. 303, "that the bulk of nominal christians are defective in the love of God." Reason and philosophy do indeed teach us to think of God with complacency and gratitude. And why? Because he is the most amiable of all beings, continually doing us good, and intending our ultimate happiness, and that of all rational creatures. The scriptures also require us to love God with all our understandings, and with all our hearts, for "God is Love." Mr. W. justly represents love to God, as "a great constituent in a true christian character," and expresses strong disapprobation of the
"dull

"dull artificial heartless gratitude" of nominal christians. But what is the God of Mr. W.'s system? A Being who first forms his creatures with a nature radically depraved, and then condemns the majority of them to eternal misery, for being what he himself made them. Can it be surprising that such a God as this is not the object of love?

It is justly observed, p. 306, that "the generous principle of love scorns the refuge of casuistry, and that the least hint, the slightest surmise, is sufficient to make it start from what is offensive, and fly with eagerness to what is gratifying, to the object of affection." But it is likewise true, that a rational love to God greatly tends to clear the mind from vain and superstitious scruples. "Perfect love casteth out fear."

An objection is here introduced by our author against the "lawfulness of theatrical amusements," from their inconsistency with the love of God; and another, p. 317, from their repugnance to general benevolence; "the situation of the performers, particularly of those of the female sex, being remarkably unfavourable to the maintenance and growth of the religious and moral principle, and of course highly dangerous to their eternal interests."

I am far from thinking that the stage, in its present state, is a perfect "school of morals," and am no advocate for a frequent, promiscuous attendance upon theatrical amusements. But the abuse of any thing

thing is no objection against the prudent and moderate use of it. Theatrical amusements are not in themselves unlawful, nor are all dramatic compositions of an immoral tendency. No amusement is more innocent, or more rational, than that of a well-regulated theatre. Nor have such entertainments been universally objected to, or declined, by persons of the greatest respectability of character, who would be as far from encouraging any thing really injurious, or immoral, as those who make the greatest professions of piety.

Christianity regulates principles and habits, and leaves particular practices to the discretion of the individual. "To him who esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean*." For those who think theatrical amusements to be universally unlawful, it is best to abstain from them altogether. But let them not be unreasonably severe in their censures of others who have no scruples of this nature, and whose characters are in no moral view unworthy of their christian profession.

The objection which is urged from the moral effect of their situation upon the performers themselves, is indeed very plausible. But the argument proves too much. - If nothing is to be done which is either directly or indirectly a means of tempting others to vice, few actions would be innocent. It is

* Rom. xiv. 14.

a principle which, in its utmost extent, would prove the unlawfulness of manufactures and commerce, which, in many cases that it would be easy to specify, are by no means favourable to the morals of the parties concerned in carrying them on. Upon the whole, therefore, the special circumstances of each case must determine the propriety of the action; but there is no good reason for condemning theatrical amusements, as universally inconsistent with the christian character.

I cannot conclude this letter without expressing my entire approbation of those "true marks of benevolence" which Mr. W. has introduced p. 312, &c. He here speaks the language of the most exalted christian philanthropy, and eloquently describes that sublime generosity to which it is agreed by all christians, how widely soever they may differ in doctrinal points, that the christian religion is intended, and by its interesting discoveries calculated, to form the minds of its professors. It is pleasing to observe, that sincere christians of all denominations agree in the moral purpose and tendency of their holy religion: and this consideration should soften that asperity and rancour, with which, through the infirmity of human nature, they are too much disposed to regard and to treat each other, for differences of opinion concerning the most efficacious means of attain-
ing

ing the end to which they unanimously profess to aspire.

I am,

Madam, &c.

L E T T E R X V .

*The little practical value of what are called "the
"peculiar doctrines of christianity."*

MADAM,

IN the five preceding sections I have had the pleasure of accompanying Mr. Wilberforce through the greater part of his route, with here and there an occasional deviation. I am sorry that in the section which is the subject of this epistle, and in which he treats of what he calls "the grand radical defect of nominal christians," namely, their neglect of, what he pronounces to be, "the peculiar doctrines of christianity," I am obliged to abandon him altogether. But truth calls, and her authority is paramount.

Remembering the time when I was myself a sincere believer in the strange and unscriptural doctrines, so eloquently recommended in this section, I ought to feel candour and sympathy for those who are still under the same delusion, and who now think and feel as I then thought and felt. But I

acknowledge, that, according to my present views, it appears wonderful that prejudice should so far mislead the understanding, as to induce a man of sense and integrity to set down as essential doctrines of christianity, tenets plainly repugnant both to its letter and spirit, and to adopt a strain of language and sentiments which more than borders upon impiety and idolatry, and which I cannot witness without a sensation of horror.

I must also observe, that as the God of this system is a Being of such stern severity, and indeed malignity, it is natural for those who receive it, willingly to imagine the existence of a second person, who, being invested with all the amiable attributes of Deity, and having also voluntarily submitted in an incarnate form to bear the wrath of God for the benefit of believers, becomes really the object of religious complacency, gratitude, and confidence, and occupies that place in the mind which properly belongs to the one living and true God. And these affections to an unreal phantom, being by meditation and exercise wrought up to a high tone, produce many of those beneficial moral effects which would result from right views of, and affections to, the Supreme Being himself. Nevertheless, these moral sentiments being founded on fancy, are as various and capricious as fancy herself, and fall far below that dignified and manly piety which is the natural result of proper attention to just and rational principles,

principles, and which is a permanent and active stimulus to universal virtue. In no human character did rational devotion ever appear in a more conspicuous light, than in that of the holy and humble Jesus, who would doubtless have rejected with abhorrence those divine honours which his mistaken followers in later ages have ascribed to him, had they been addressed to him previous to his departure from this world.

In this section, Mr. W. first complains of the forgetfulness of, what he calls, the "peculiar doctrines of christianity:" to this, he tells us, "it is owing that some men satisfy themselves with "partial reform," p. 320. and "others are tempted "to despair," p. 322. He then describes the "advice of modern religionists to such as are desirous "of repenting," p. 324. and immediately afterwards, p. 325, "the advice which" he says that "the "holy scriptures and the church of England give to "the same persons." He then states "the distinction, between the true christian and all other religionists, concerning the nature of holiness and "the way in which it is to be obtained," p. 326. He represents "attention to these doctrines as the "proper means of growing in grace," p. 328. and recommends "looking to Jesus, as that which best "teaches the importance of christianity," p. 331. "which enforces the duty of devotedness to God," p. 332. "together with the guilt of sin, and dread

"of punishment," *ib.* "which best promotes love
 "to God," p. 334.—"to Christ," p. 335.—"and
 "to our fellow-creatures," p. 336.—"which pro-
 "duces humility," p. 337.—"moderation in earth-
 "ly pursuits, and cheerfulness in suffering," p. 339.
 —"courage and confidence in dangers, and hea-
 "venly-mindedness," p. 342; and he concludes the
 section with observing, p. 346, "that the place held
 "by the (supposed) peculiar doctrines of christi-
 "anity constitutes the grand distinction between
 "nominal and real christians.

"The grand radical defect in the practical system
 "of nominal christians" is said, p. 320, to be "the
 "forgetfulness of all the peculiar doctrines of the
 "religion they profess, viz. the corruption of human
 "nature, the atonement of the Saviour, and the
 "sanctifying influence of the holy spirit;" none of
 which doctrines are true in fact, nor derive the least
 countenance from the christian scriptures. Happy
 had it been if they had never been invented, and
 thrice happy when they shall be totally forgotten.

"That men who in sickness form good resolu-
 "tions do, when they recover, sometimes relapse
 "into their old habits of sin," and sometimes "take
 "up with a partial and scanty amendment," is im-
 puted, p. 321, "to a prevailing ignorance of the
 "real nature of christianity, and forgetfulness of its
 "grand peculiarities;" meaning thereby the un-
 scriptural notions stated above. This sophism is
 called

called by logicians the "affignation of a false cause." The fact is but too true, that many who make good resolutions upon a sick bed forget them with returning health. And this is owing, in part, to the return of the usual state of the brain, and with it the usual state of mind previous to sickness; so that the will to reform is wanting, and the virtuous disposition produced by sickness vanishes like a dream. Also, where inclination remains, and the judgment continues to be convinced of the necessity of reformation, resolution often fails. An undue confidence is frequently placed in a supposed freedom of the will, which encourages a person to venture into circumstances of temptation, and makes him negligent of that mental discipline, by the persevering use of which alone inveterate habits of vice can be eradicated, and virtuous affections substituted in their place.

Mr. W. p. 324, states what he calls "the advice of modern religionists to such as are desirous of repenting," viz. "Be sorry for your sins; discontinue the practice of them; do your utmost; discharge with fidelity the duties of your stations; read such books as will instruct you in the principles of a christian life," and the like. And truly the advice of these "modern religionists" appears to be very salutary, and no reasonable objection could have been made to it, had it not been interlarded with the unscriptural fictions of the "merits of Christ,"

“Christ,” and the supernatural “assistance of the Holy Spirit.”

Should any person in the circumstances supposed, oppressed by the tyranny of evil habits, and sincerely desirous of radical reformation, or, in other words, of becoming a real christian, apply for advice to a judicious and well-informed instructor, such an adviser would perhaps say to the solicitous inquirer: It is needless to pay regard to those unscriptural doctrines which many so highly extol; such as *original sin, incarnation, atonement, plenary satisfaction, merits of Christ*, and the like; they may perplex your understanding, and divert your attention from useful truth, but they can do no good. The age of miracles is past. Expect no supernatural impressions upon your mind, and do not fancy that moral and religious principles and habits are to be acquired in a different way from other habits of mind. Do not strain scripture metaphors to senses which their authors never intended; and imagine not that any mystery is contained in those strong expressions, by which the apostles meant nothing more than to describe the great change which passed upon an idolatrous heathen, or a pharisaic jew, when he became a sincere christian. Discard mysticism, and do not suppose that religion is a state of mind which keeps the passions in constant agitation and effervescence. The practice of virtue depends infinitely more upon settled principles than upon warm and transient feelings.

feelings. Consult the scriptures. "Do justice, love
"mercy, walk humbly with God; cease to do evil;
"learn to do well; though your sins are as scarlet,
"they shall be whiter than snow; though red like
"crimson, they shall be as wool: Fear God, and
"keep his commandments: Repent, and be con-
"verted, that your sins may be blotted out: Love
"God with all your understanding, and with all
"your heart, and your neighbour as yourself."
What can be more intelligible, or more rational,
than such directions as these?

To excite you to an habitual, practical regard to
them, fix in your mind just and honourable senti-
ments of God, as the greatest, wisest and best of
Beings, who cannot act unjustly by any of his crea-
tures; whose fixed purpose it is to make them
happy; and who permits the existence of no evil,
natural or moral, but what is necessary to accom-
plish this end. Remember, that the very definition
of virtue is, a course of conduct leading to the
greatest ultimate happiness;—of vice, that which
leads to misery. You are deficient in virtuous ha-
bits, you wish to form them; you have contracted
vicious affections, you wish to exterminate them.

Men are the creatures of circumstances: and
habits grow, or fade, by the influence of correspond-
ing impressions, with the same regularity, and cer-
tainty, with which the fruits of the earth are pro-

duced, and matured, by the genial influence of the sun and of the fructifying showers, or blighted by the lightning and the mildew. You know the circumstances in which your vicious habits were originally contracted, and by which they have been confirmed. Avoid these circumstances, and give the mind a contrary bias. You know what impressions will produce justice, benevolence, piety, devotion, and all other moral virtues. Expose your mind repeatedly, and perseveringly, to the influence of these impressions, and the affections themselves will gradually rise, and insensibly improve, till they grow to their proper perfection, and your virtue becomes fixed, and disinterested. All that is required is judgment, resolution, time, and perseverance; and in every stage of your progress you will thankfully ascribe all your improvements, your hopes, and your consolations, to God, to whose appointment, and continued agency, all causes owe their efficacy.

By such advice as this, a judicious instructor would neither expect nor desire to produce one of those ecstatic christians, who are sometimes mounted "on the top of Pisgah," exulting in the prospect of the promised land, and at other times sighing and weeping in the "vale of humiliation," and tormenting themselves with doubts and imaginary terrors; sometimes full of rapturous affection to their "Beloved," and their souls carried out "like the
"chariots

"chariots of Amminadib*," and at other times mourning under "the hidings of his face," and crying out, "Why stay his chariot wheels?" In other words, who are amusing, or alarming, themselves with vain phantoms of the imagination, instead of engaging with alacrity in the duties of life. But, by properly attending to the advice proposed, they would become virtuous, amiable, and useful characters; respected by the wise and good; enjoying peace in their own minds; reposing a cheerful confidence in God; and looking forward with hope to a blessed immortality: their lives would be honourable and exemplary; their death tranquil; and their reward glorious.

In contradiction to all this, Mr. W.'s advice to such persons, p. 325, concurring, as he says, with the church of England, is, "to lay afresh the whole foundation of their religion, to prostrate themselves before the cross of Christ with humble penitence and deep self-abhorrence, solemnly resolving to forsake all their sins, but relying on the grace of God alone for power to keep their resolution. Thus, and thus only, *She* assures them that all their crimes will be blotted out, and that they will receive from above a new living principle of holiness." Then follow a series of texts

* No chariots of Amminadib

The heavenly raptures can describe. WATTS:

which he tells us that "*She* produces from the word "of God as the ground and warrant of her counsel." But if *She* produces no better evidence of her other doctrines than of these, it is much to be feared that *She* will be found very deficient when weighed in the balances of reason and truth. Not a word do any of these texts contain, of "prostration at the foot of the cross," not a word of "dependence upon the influences of the spirit," not a word of "receiving a new living principle of holiness."

The first is, Acts xvi. 31. "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved:" where the apostle exhorts the terrified jailor to receive the christian religion, as the only means of saving him from the bondage of idolatry and vice, and all its miserable consequences. In the succeeding texts, quoted from John xv. our Lord, under the emblem of "a vine and its branches," represents a stedfast adherence to christian principles as essential to the perfection of christian morals.

The last passage is taken from the epistle to the Ephesians, or rather the Laodiceans*, ch. ii. 8. And the true meaning is, what no one who is critically acquainted with St. Paul's language can mistake,

* See Dr. Paley's *Horæ Paulinæ*, an admirable work, which exhibits a most satisfactory defence of the genuineness of St. Paul's epistles, in a masterly arrangement of presumptive and circumstantial evidence.

that God had graciously imparted the gospel to them, without any antecedent merits of their own; that having been converted from heathen idolatry to the knowledge and worship of the true God, they were in a manner introduced into a new world; and that the design of this extraordinary change was to make them virtuous and happy. "By grace are ye saved," from idolatry and vice; "through faith," that is, by embracing the christian religion: "and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God." You did not originally seek for the blessings of the gospel; but God communicated them to you unasked, and when you were unconcerned about them, and undeserving of them.

"Not of works, lest any man should boast." There was not a heathen in the world who could claim the privileges of the gospel as the merited reward of his virtues. "For we are his workmanship:" God, having freely given these privileges, is to be regarded as the proper cause of the happy effects produced by them. He is the author of this stupendous change, which may be considered as an introduction into a new state of being: "We are created in Christ Jesus to good works." The effect of heathen principles was vice and profligacy; but the tendency of the christian doctrine is to universal virtue.

Mr. W. p. 327, inaccurately represents "the grand distinction between the true christian and

"other religionists to subsist concerning the nature of holiness, and the way in which it is to be obtained. The nature of holiness," he tells us, "is no other than the restoration of the image of God." And I believe that all *religionists* (as he is pleased to denominate those who differ from him, in contradistinction to *true christians*, that is, to the abettors of his own opinions) will agree, that virtue consists in conformity to the moral attributes of God. But there is an essential difference of opinion between them, with respect to the manner of acquiring it. Mr. W.'s true christian, "disclaiming with indignation every idea of attaining it by his own strength, all his hopes of possessing it rest altogether in the divine assurances of the operation of the holy spirit;" while my "*religionist*," expecting moral habits to be acquired precisely in the same way in which other habits are attained, makes use of similar means: and when the end is accomplished, he will ascribe it to the Supreme Being, in the same sense in which all other good things are to be referred to him, who is the Cause of all causes, and whose energy gives efficacy to every intermediate agency.

Mr. W.'s true christian farther "knows," p. 328, what I hope that my "*religionist*" will ever remain ignorant of, viz. that "this holiness is not to *precede* reconciliation to God, and be its *cause*, but to *follow* it, and be its *effect*;" that is, in other

words, that a vicious man may be in a state of reconciliation with God: than which nothing can be more repugnant to truth, and to the whole tenor of christianity. Mr. W. has indeed a saving clause, namely, that "by faith in Christ only he is justified in the sight of God;" informing us in a note, "that faith when genuine includes repentance." Now, according to this state of the question, either a man may "repent" without being "holy," or he may be "justified in the sight of God" without "being in a state of reconciliation with him." Mr. W.'s "true christian" may, perhaps, be able to solve this difficulty, which, I fear, would puzzle the more obtuse intellect of my simple "religionist." And this is the more unfortunate, as we are assured, p. 329, that "these gigantic truths retained in view would put to shame the littleness of their dwarfish morality."

Mr. W. further observes, p. 328, that the christian finds, in the consideration "of the peculiar doctrines of the gospel, and in the contemplation of the life, character, and sufferings of our blessed Saviour, the elements of all practical wisdom." To this observation I give my cordial assent, provided that no doctrines are admitted as the peculiar doctrines of the gospel, but what the gospel contains.

The remainder of this section, from p. 331, is taken up in shewing that looking unto Jesus, by which
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the pious writer means an habitual regard to the doctrine and example of Christ, is "the best means" of producing and supporting the christian virtues" which he there specifies. I entirely concur with him in thinking, that just views of, and serious reflections upon, the character and doctrine of our great Master have the most beneficial moral tendency.

But erroneous views tend to produce erroneous affections, and an erroneous practice; of which we have various instances in the case before us.

"Looking unto Jesus," says Mr. W. p. 332. "We find displayed in the most lively colours the "guilt of sin, and how hateful it must be to the "perfect holiness of God, when we see that, rather "than sin should go unpunished, God spared not "his own son, but was pleased to bruise him and "put him to grief." Where does the scripture tell us that Jesus suffered, that "sin might not go unpunished?" and where does it require us to look to the sufferings of Christ, to impress upon our minds a sense of the evil of sin? How unworthy the character of the Supreme Being to punish the innocent for the guilty! And how inconsistent with the declarations of the scriptures, which uniformly represent the wicked as punished for their own sins, and penitents as freely pardoned by Divine mercy, without reference to any foreign consideration whatever!

The son of God is said, p. 333, "to have con-
sented

"*sented* to take upon him our degraded nature;" language most unscriptural and untrue, and what Jesus never affirmed of himself, nor his apostles concerning him.

Mr. W. p. 334, represents "looking to Jesus as" "the best means of growing in love to God." I think so too, but not in his sense of the phrase. The gospel is God's best gift to man. It brings life and immortality to light. But that God, having first placed his creatures in a state of helpless misery, should send an innocent person to redeem a few by suffering in their stead, whatever joy it may excite in those who are, or who fancy themselves to be, the fortunate objects of this choice, can never generate a rational and cordial love to a Being so capricious and cruel. Happily for us, the character of the true God is the reverse of this: all amiable, just, wise, and good.

Much is advanced, p. 337, to shew the tendency of "looking to Jesus to promote humility." But to be "impressed with a sense of our natural darkness, "and helplessness, and misery, from which it was "requisite to ransom us at such a price," is not christian humility, but injustice to our wise and good Creator, and an unwarrantable depreciation of his works.

I agree, however, with Mr. W. p. 339, that from the sufferings of Christ we may justly learn not to estimate earthly prosperity too highly; and to be willing,

willing, like our honoured master, to make great sacrifices in the cause of truth, and for the good of others.

We are told, p. 346, "that the main distinction, "between real christianity and the system of the "bulk of nominal christians, chiefly consists in the "different place which is assigned in the two "schemes to the peculiar doctrines of the gospel. "These, in the scheme of nominal christians, if "admitted at all, appear but like the stars in the "firmament to the ordinary eye; but to the *real* "christian, on the contrary, these peculiar doctrines "constitute the centre to which he gravitates, the "very sun of his system, the soul of the world, the "origin of all that is excellent and lovely! the "source of light, and life, and motion, and genial "warmth and plastic energy."

In terms like these would an eloquent catholic express himself concerning the doctrine of transubstantiation, the worship of the virgin, and the sacrifice of the mass, which are to him essential doctrines of the gospel received by "all *real* christians." Thus does zeal often increase in proportion as the doctrines defended recede from the simplicity of truth, and the purity of the gospel. But notwithstanding these confident assertions, we, who admit the scriptures only as our rule, have no hesitation in denouncing what are here called "the peculiar "doctrines of christianity," as gross corruptions of the

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the true religion of Jesus. And though we do not, after the example of Mr. W. confine the honourable distinction of "real christians" to those only who think with us upon these subjects, we regard it as an indispensable duty, upon every proper occasion, to avow our determined rejection of them, and to enter our public, solemn protest against them.

Mr. W. concludes his section with a quotation containing the following address to Christ, *here* called, but no where in the scriptures, "the eternal Word."

From Thee is all that soothes the life of man,
His high endeavour and his glad success,
His strength to suffer, and his will to serve.
But, O thou bounteous Giver of all good,
Thou art, of all thy gifts, thyself the crown.

Language equally unscriptural and unbecoming occurs p. 341, where Jesus is addressed as "calling upon us to suffer; as ordaining disappointment, poverty, sickness, and shame; and as compensating temporal sufferings by the consolations of his grace."

This may justly be called supplanting the true God in the throne of the universe, by the introduction of an imaginary substitute. If Christ is the "centre of all minds," the "giver of all good," and the "disposer of all events," that great Being, whom the pious and humble Jesus calls "his Father" and

"and our Father, his God and our God *," is a mere cypher in the creation. Surely, this is palpable idolatry. And that any persons professing the christian religion, with the scriptures in their hands, should receive a doctrine, and exemplify a practice, so directly repugnant to the first principles of the christian religion, and to its most explicit precepts, is a fact which could hardly be credited, if not verified by daily experience; and is a memorable and much to be lamented instance of the fascinating power of religious prejudice.

I am, Madam, &c.

LETTER XVI.

Excellences of christianity. Internal evidence.

MADAM,

IN the short chapter, c. v. which succeeds that in which Mr. Wilberforce treats so much in detail upon what he regards as "the prevailing inadequate conceptions of practical christianity," he insists upon "the excellence of christianity in certain important particulars, and upon the argument which

* John xx. 17.

"results

“results thence in proof of its divine origin.” And he here notices “the consistency between the leading doctrines and practical precepts of christianity, p. 350, amongst each other.” Having pursued this subject a little in detail, he mentions it as “a further excellence of the christian religion, that it sets a higher value upon moral than upon intellectual attainment;” p. 356. and he concludes the chapter with noticing “the strong presumption in favour of the divine authority of the christian religion, arising from the different species of proofs which concur in establishing it.”

In the general sentiments advanced in this chapter, I am happy to agree with the very respectable author; and the concluding observations in favour of the divine original of the christian religion, though not new, are just, and placed in a strong and striking light. But, so far as the observations concerning the mutual harmony and beneficial influence of christian doctrines and moral precepts are well founded, they are by no means peculiar to those opinions which are dignified with the title of “the leading doctrines of christianity;” but, on the contrary, the beauty and harmony of the christian scheme, of doctrine and morals, is much more clearly apparent, when it is exhibited in its original simple form, purified from the dregs of human inventions.

In reference to “the perfect harmony of the
“leading

“leading doctrines of christianity among each other, “it is alleged, p. 350, to be self-evident, that the “corruption of human nature, that our reconciliation to God by the atonement of Christ, and “that the restoration of our primitive dignity by the “sanctifying influence of the holy spirit, are all “parts of one whole united in close dependence “and mutual congruity.” Now, though it may be allowed that there is a visible connexion between the doctrine of “natural depravity” and the “sanctifying influences of the spirit,” there is none between that doctrine and the supposed “atonement “of Christ.” For, if God made human nature depraved and guilty, what need could there be of satisfaction from another Being, to reconcile him to his own work? At any rate, the consistency of these doctrines is nothing more than the consistency of error, one error naturally producing another, till in the end genuine christianity is almost lost. Popery is a consistent system, but is it therefore true? Transubstantiation, merit, purgatory, auricular confession, absolution, indulgences, and prayers for the dead, “are all parts of one whole, united in close “dependence and mutual congruity;” but they are not, for that reason, truths of the gospel; nor have the “peculiar and leading doctrines” of Mr. W. any better pretensions.

Concerning the mutual consistency of the evangelical precepts, it is well observed, p. 352, that
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“for loving-kindness and meekness a solid foundation is laid in self-denial, moderation, and humility;” and p. 356, “that christianity, teaching us not to prize human estimation at a very high rate, provides for the practice of loving those who justly or unjustly may have wounded our character.” Also, p. 356, “that it is another capital excellence of christianity, that she values moral attainments at a much higher rate than intellectual acquisitions.” We are not, however, to conclude, that great eminence in virtue is to be attained by men who are grossly ignorant. A man may be a great scholar, and a profound philosopher, without being eminently virtuous; but no man can rise to distinguished moral excellence without a considerable insight into human nature, and comprehensive views of the theory of morals and the principles of religion. No mistake is more frequent, nor more derogatory from the dignity of morals, than that of supposing that knowledge is not essential to virtue. It is no doubt true, that many weak, ignorant people are as pious and good as they know how to be. But no great, exalted, and eminently useful character was ever formed without having its foundation laid in a capacious and highly cultivated understanding.

It is observed, p. 359, that “the operations of the holy spirit, prompting and aiding our diligent
“endea-

“endeavours, would infallibly crown our labours
 “with success, and make us partakers of a divine
 “nature.” It is unnecessary here to repeat the ob-
 jections, already so frequently urged, against the
 unphilosophical and unscriptural doctrine of the
 holy spirit, and his supernatural influences; but it
 is particularly worthy of remark, with what propri-
 ety Mr. W. uses the strong expression of being made
 “partakers of the divine nature*.” How asto-
 nished would this gentleman be, if any of his read-
 ers could so far mistake his meaning, as to suppose
 that he intended to represent sincere christians as
 substantially united with the Supreme Being, par-
 taking of the same attributes, and entitled to the
 same honours! Such is the error of those who be-
 lieve in the deity of Jesus of Nazareth, to whom
 no epithet equally expressive of true and proper di-
 vinity is applied in the whole New Testament.

I am, Madam, &c.

* 1 Pet. i. 4.

L E T T E R X V I I .

On the state of religion in this country, and its importance to us as a political community.

MADAM,

MR. Wilberforce in his next chapter, p. 364, professes “to inquire into the state of christianity in “this country, and its importance to us as a political community.” No one can be more fully persuaded than I am, that practical christianity is of the highest importance to society, as it comprehends the most perfect rule of life, and suggests the most efficacious motives, both to private and public virtue; in which view, every true and enlightened friend to his country, whether in a private or public capacity, will contribute to the utmost of his power, by every judicious means, to promote it. But here again Mr. W. unfortunately confounds his own unscriptural system with the doctrine of the New Testament, and by this fallacious test he forms his judgement of the actual state of religion in this country; and, as might naturally be expected, his conclusions are not more accurate than his standard.

Mr. W. is incorrect when he asserts, p. 364, “the “tendency of *religion in general* to promote the temporal well-being of political communities.” This assertion holds good only of *true* religion. False religions,

gions, such as paganism and popery, tend to debase the public intellect, and to deprave the public morals. Such religions, indeed, serve as engines of state, far better than rational piety, and have therefore, in every age, been cried up by interested statesmen and their hireling priests; but they can never be approved by the judicious friends of virtue and mankind.

Mr. W. having remarked, p. 369, that "persecution generally tends to quicken the vigour and extend the prevalence of the opinions which she would eradicate," argues the decline of christianity in this country, p. 370, "from her having long been embodied in an establishment which is intimately blended, and is generally and justly believed to have a common interest, with our civil institutions, which is liberally endowed, and, not more favoured in wealth than dignity, has been allowed to exalt her mitred front in courts and parliaments."

To this representation, as a statement of facts, I can by no means yield my assent.

Pure christianity is so far from meeting with public encouragement in this country, that it is at this hour in a state bordering upon persecution. And they who have courage openly to profess it, and to bear their public (however unassuming) testimony against prevailing corruptions, are regarded with suspicion, branded with opprobrious names, and unjustly

justly exposed to public odium, as enemies to religion and to their country. One venerable man, whose name will ever be dear to the friends of truth and science, whose purity of character bids defiance to calumny, and whose simplicity of manners indicates the correctness of his principles and the dignity of his mind, has, *solely* for his ardent zeal for truth, and his fearless profession of genuine christianity, been compelled to seek for refuge in the transatlantic wilderness, where, among the enlightened sages of a rising empire, he has found that safety, tranquillity, and renown, which was denied to his declining years by his deluded and ungrateful country. Mr. W.'s assertion is nevertheless true. "Christianity has always thriven under persecutions." The number of rational christians, who, rejecting all human additions to divine revelation, adhere faithfully to the simplicity of truth, was never so great as at present. And it is still a progressive cause. May it never be impeded in its course by the injudicious support of civil authority! For I acknowledge, that my idea of a civil establishment of the christian religion is diametrically opposite to that of Mr. W. The system which he calls christianity, may indeed be "embodied in an establishment which is intimately blended, and hath a common interest, with civil institutions." But the kingdom of Christ "is not of this world," and his doctrine shall reign triumphant, when all human systems, with the au-

thorities which support them, shall vanish "like the
"baseless fabric of a vision."

The immediate tendency of a civil establishment of religion is to obstruct the progress of christian principles, and of sound morals. When a system, whether true or false, is once established, and the profession of it is paid for out of the public purse, all inquiry is at an end. Integrity, and the love of truth, yield to indolence, pride, and bitter zeal against those who attack, not the doctrines of religion, but those of the public creed. An established priesthood is, in its very nature, a persecuting order. There has been no exception to this rule. Heathen and christian, jew and mahometan, papist and protestant, episcopalian and presbyterian, when in power, have all breathed the same fiery, intemperate spirit; a few enlightened individuals only excepted. Men who are engaged to defend an established system are, from that very circumstance, engaged to discourage inquiry, and to oppose truth, unless (which is not often the case) truth should happen to be the established doctrine.

Mr. W. proceeds, p. 371, to exhibit an "hypothetical delineation" of that state of religion which might be expected to take place in a country circumstanced like our own, and concludes, p. 376, with an appeal to facts as justifying his gloomy apprehensions. "Every where," says he, "we
"may actually trace the effects of increasing wealth
"and

“and luxury, in banishing one by one the habits,
“and new modelling the phraseology, of stricter
“times; and in diffusing throughout the middle
“ranks those relaxed morals and dissipated manners,
“which were formerly confined to the higher classes
“of society.”

“I pity the man” (to borrow our author’s own words upon another occasion) “who can travel from
“Dan to Beer-sheba, and cry, It is all barren;”
who, when he views the moral conduct of his fellow-creatures, can discern nothing but depravity of nature, and progression in vice. It is indeed true, that the mass of mankind, in the present age, pay too little attention to religion; but at what period were they more pious, and virtuous, than they now are? I doubt the justice, as well as the wisdom, of the eternal declamation, that the “former times
“were better than these.” In the present age there is indeed an unusual tendency to infidelity; but it may justly be doubted, whether the moral consequences of modern scepticism be more injurious, than the old habit of implicit faith, and its usual accompaniments bigotry and persecution. Genuine christianity was, probably, never better understood in this country, nor more generally practised, than at present. Persons who conceive that religion consists in antiquated phraseology, in attachment to unscriptural doctrines and creeds, and to sabbatical observations, or in the number and length of religious

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gious exercises, will of course imagine that religion is now much on the decline. But they who place the essence of christianity in active benevolence, and habitual self-government, from a regard to God, and under the expectation of a future life, may perhaps see reason to think that there is as much real religion *now*, as *formerly* when there was more parade of it. If love to God be in any degree diminished, it may in part be attributed to the unamiable representations which the popular system exhibits of the Supreme Being. We cannot take pleasure in meditating upon God, nor feel proper regard towards him, till we have learned to conceive of him as perfectly wise, benevolent, and just; and to regard him as our Father, and our Friend.

Amongst other instances of national degeneracy, Mr. W. mentions, p. 377, "giving up to vanity and dissipation the portion of the week set apart to the service of religion;" and, likewise, "availing ourselves of the certainty of an interval from public business on a day of national humiliation, to secure a meeting for convivial purposes."

That persons who are prohibited by law from following their usual occupations on the Sunday, and who have no taste for the services of religion, pass that day in idleness and dissipation, highly prejudicial to their morals, is a fact too obvious to be denied, and which every sincere friend to virtue and religion must deeply lament. And it is evidently

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owing, entirely, to the folly of attempting to enforce the supposed laws of God by civil sanctions. Men may be compelled to be idle, but they cannot be compelled to be good. And the natural and necessary consequence of idleness is vice. Without pretending to the gift of prophecy, I will venture to predict, that as long as the present injudicious laws, enforcing the sabbatical observation of the first day of the week, remain in the statute-book, the national morals will be more corrupted on that day than upon all the others taken together. Happily for the interest of good morals, the legislature wisely declined to adopt a proposition, introduced not long since by some well-meaning but ill-advised members of the house of commons, for enforcing a still stricter observation of the Lord's day. But the public morals will never be entirely freed from an unfavourable bias from this quarter, till the apostolical canon becomes the law of the land, "As one
"man regards one day above another, and another
"regards every day alike, let every one be fully persuaded in his own mind, and freely enjoy his
"own opinion*."

A religious distinction of days having been expressly abolished by the christian law, no human authority hath any just right to revive it; much less is any one at liberty to condemn another for devot-

* Rom. xiv. 5.

ing a day to innocent cheerfulness, which he chooses to dedicate to rigorous austerity. But this censorious spirit is the natural consequence of such voluntary services. The puerile notion, that occasional abstinence from food is acceptable to God, any farther than it may be conducive to health or temperance; or, that it is more agreeable to the Almighty that a man should dine upon fish rather than upon flesh, is inconsistent with the manly genius of christianity, and even with common sense. A national fast, therefore, is at best an unauthorized and an insignificant institution. But if such a ceremony is ever appointed by a body of men, who, notoriously disregarding all appearances of religion themselves, make use of it as a mere engine of state, to subserve their own sinister purposes, it behoves every one who is really concerned for the honour of christianity, to treat such an institution with neglect, as an affront to religion and decency*.

Mr. W.'s zeal in the cause of national deterioration has led him, p. 378, to make the extraordinary and unfounded assertion, that, "improving in almost

* Mr. W. takes some pains, in the note p. 377, to exculpate his friend Mr. Pitt from the heinous offence of giving a dinner on the fast day. Our worthy author does not seem to be aware, that the world is now too much enlightened to suppose that statesmen are themselves serious in such observances. The public are fully sensible that fasts are intended for the swinish multitude, and not for cabinet ministers.

“every other branch of knowledge, we have become
“less and less acquainted with christianity.” Now,
religion being a subject sufficiently interesting to at-
tract the attention of the most intelligent and in-
quisitive minds, it does not appear in itself probable,
that religious knowledge would decline when every
other science was in a state of progressive improve-
ment. And the fact is the reverse of this; of which
Mr. W. himself might have been convinced, had he
read with sufficient attention the works of Locke,
Taylor, Peirce, Lardner, Benson, Jebb, Wakefield,
Evanson, Lindfey, Priestley, and many others. He
would there have found, that, by the industry and
ingenuity of men of learning and integrity, innume-
rable difficulties have been cleared up, and many in-
terpolations, omissions, false readings, mistransla-
tions, and erroneous interpretations, which have
laid a foundation for, or have been appealed to in
support of, various corrupt systems of doctrine,
have been in the most satisfactory manner corrected,
or removed. The consequence of which is, that to
those who now devote a serious and critical atten-
tion to the scriptures, the christian doctrine appears
plain, simple, rational, every way worthy of God,
and established upon a basis of evidence, internal
and external, which no sophistry can evade, nor
malignity subvert. It would be inexcusable upon
this head, not to notice the great benefit which the

christian religion has derived, in the course of this century, from the labours of learned foreigners, and particularly of those indefatigable critics who have applied their industry and ingenuity to the formation of a correct text of the New Testament, by the collation of a great number of valuable manuscripts, ancient versions, and quotations by the early christian writers. Amongst these, the last but not the least meritorious is Griesbach, whose critical edition of the New Testament in Greek is an invaluable treasure to the Biblical student. Nor can I, upon this occasion, refrain from offering the tribute of respect and gratitude due to a nobleman, the splendour of whose rank and talents is only exceeded by the eminence of his virtues, and his firm but unassuming attachment to pure and rational christianity, for the liberal assistance he has afforded to the learned author, to enable him to furnish a more correct edition of that truly estimable work. If Mr. W. had employed his time in studying the scriptures diligently and critically, with such helps as these, instead of poring over creeds, articles, and homilies, the works of honest, pious, and useful men, who in their day were "burning and shining lights," but who, just emerging from the barbarism of the dark ages, were destitute of the many advantages which we enjoy for attaining scriptural knowledge, he would not have hazarded the extra-

vagant position, that, "improving in almost every
" other branch of knowledge, we have become less
" and less acquainted with christianity."

It is mentioned, p. 378, as a matter of serious regret, that a disposition prevails even among "orthodox christians themselves, to forget the peculiar doctrines by which their religion is characterized, and to regard christianity as a mere system of ethics;" and the reason assigned, p. 381, for this declension is, that the abuse of these doctrines, "by the sectaries of the last century," led the divines of the established church into a practical strain of preaching; "and their example having been followed during the present century, these peculiar doctrines have at length almost altogether vanished from the view."

Of this neglect a more probable reason may perhaps be, that men of understanding, beginning to suspect the truth of the doctrines, and not thinking it prudent, or even decent, to preach against the tenets of a church of which they were members, and from which they derived subsistence, regarded it as the best and safest course, to be silent upon these topics, and to confine themselves wholly to practical subjects.

Mr. W. affirms, p. 379, that "christianity in its best days was such as it is delineated in his work." And in proof of this assertion, he appeals to the writings of the reformers, and their successors, and

to the articles, homilies, and liturgy of the church. But notwithstanding this parade of authorities, it is a certain fact, that genuine christianity bears not the smallest resemblance to that spurious system which is here offered to our view. The times of emerging from the corruptions of popery were indeed "good days," and the men who helped forward the necessary work of reformation were, in general, men of exemplary morals and unusual energy of mind. But they were not infallible. It was not to be expected that they should at once shake off all the prejudices of their education. They left much to be done by those who came after them; who, enjoying the benefit of their light, might see much farther than they did. God be praised, *ours* are "better days" than theirs, both with respect to light and liberty. We see and hear what "those righteous men of old," had they been now living, and had their advances in knowledge kept pace with their means of improvement, "would have rejoiced to see and hear, but were not permitted *."

That

* As a protestant nonconformist, I thank Mr. W. for his spirited protest, p. 339, against the Act of Uniformity, and the consequent ejection of many of the brightest ornaments of the church, in "shameful violation of the royal word, as well as of "the clear principles of justice." This is the more liberal, as Mr. W. appears himself to be a zealous member of the established church. Baxter well deserves the encomiums passed upon his talents

That the compilers of the articles, homilies, and liturgy, were believers in the "peculiar doctrines" so often alluded to, cannot be denied; and the authoritative imposition of such articles exhibits a melancholy proof of the inconsistency of the early reformers, in attempting to set limits to the progress of moral and intellectual improvement, and to abridge in others that right of private judgment, the plenary exercise of which they so nobly and justly challenged for themselves.

Mr. W. affirms, p. 380, and perhaps truly, that the doctrines he calls peculiar "were grievously" "abused by many of the sectaries, who, while they" "talked copiously of the free grace of Christ, and" "the operations of the Holy Spirit, were by their" "lives an open scandal to the name of christian." Yet Mr. W. does not think these doctrines the less true, because they were professed by men of immoral characters. Let him not then be surprised, if serious Unitarians do not think the worse of *their* principles because they are maintained by some who are not of a serious spirit. And let him acknowledge the fallacy of judging of the truth of principles by the characters of those who profess them.

talents and his virtues. Mr. W. might have added to the list of his works, abridged by the late Mr. Fawcett of Kidderminster, his "Converse with God in Solitude." An abridgment of the "Reformed Pastor" was published some years ago by Mr. Palmer of Hackney.

Considering the spirit of the present times, it discovers a considerable degree of liberality to speak in respectful terms of the dissenting writers*. I cannot however entirely acquiesce in all the commendations bestowed upon them p. 381. Owen, Howe and Flavel were great and popular men in their day; but their works at present are of little use. Dr. Evans's "Christian Temper" is excellent for the time in which it was written, and by a judicious reader may still be perused with advantage. But it is in a great measure superseded by more recent publications, both of the established and the dissenting clergy. Perhaps the best practical treatise in the English language is Dr. Hartley's Observations on the Rule of Life, at the close of his celebrated Observations on Man. But even in Hartley there are some exceptionable passages, which a candid judicious reader will easily discover, and readily excuse.

* It would however have been more consistent with genuine liberality to have avoided the use of the obnoxious word "sectary." If this word signified nothing more than a dissenter from an established church, the use of it would not be liable to objection. But it is constantly used as a term of reproach. The church of Rome consistently enough brands the protestants as sectaries, because she claims to be the only true and infallible church. But for protestants, whose common and fundamental principle is the right of private judgment, to load each other with opprobrious epithets for differences of opinion, is in the highest degree unreasonable and inconsistent.

Dr.

Dr. Doddridge's Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul, his sermons on Regeneration, and those on the Power and Grace of Christ, though they contain some valuable advice, are formed upon a very erroneous and unscriptural system, and the perusal of them tends to introduce a train of visionary speculations, and fantastic emotions, which have little connexion with rational piety. Dr. Doddridge's attachment to the gloomy system of calvinism, or to something that would pass for it, and his love of popularity, strangely warped his judgment in the interpretation of the scriptures, and have rendered him in many instances a very unsafe guide to their true meaning*.

Mr. Orton's Life of Dr. Doddridge contains many useful facts and observations; it exhibits the subject

* Dr. Doddridge's Expositor is in many respects a valuable work; the notes are useful, and the Improvements are drawn up with animation, and breathe a truly pious and benevolent spirit. But that his judgment was biased in an uncommon degree, in the interpretation of those passages in which his orthodoxy might be brought into question, is but too apparent to every one who pays sufficient attention to this popular work. One instance, out of many, occurs Rom. iii. 25. where the expression *propitiation* is introduced, though it is well known that the word, so translated, has no other sense in the sacred writings than that of a Mercy-seat. Thus it is that unlearned readers are made to believe that the apostles teach doctrines of which they never entertained a thought; and such spurious tenets are too often called "fundamental truths," and the "peculiar doctrines of the gospel."

of

of the narrative as a man of a very active mind, and a pious, benevolent heart : but it has too much the appearance of an attempt to delineate a character, according to the author's idea of perfection, beyond the standard of human excellence ; a fault common to most biographers.

It is held out, p. 386, as " a melancholy prognostic " of the state to which we are progressive, that many " of the most eminent of the literati of modern " times have been professed unbelievers." The truth is, that many reputed philosophers, and men of learning in all ages, have been unbelievers ; one cause of which has been, a want of attention to the evidences of revelation ; and another, the many corruptions of revealed truth, which have been mistaken for christian doctrines, to which men of sense and reflection could not assent. But there has always been a numerous band of men, eminent for talents and learning, who have appeared in defence of the christian cause ; and rational christianity is never in want of a sufficient number of learned and judicious advocates.

That an absurd and domineering religious establishment, the doctrines of which were held in contempt by every man of sense and reflection, should have produced a great number of unbelievers among the thinking part of the French nation, is not surprising. It is the necessary consequence of such establishments. Nor is it difficult to discover why

Mr. W.

Mr. W. as a political partisan, may think fit to join the senseless clamour against the French, as a nation of atheists. But upon what grounds, as a christian, as a protestant, and as one who has assumed the office of a public censor of the principles and morals of his christian brethren, he can justify his representation of the abolition of popery in France, p. 388, "as publicly withdrawing their allegiance from the Majesty of Heaven," it becomes that gentleman seriously to consider. Every enlightened christian must surely rejoice in the dissolution of the absurdest system which ever disgraced the name of religion; and, placing full confidence in the omnipotence of truth, can entertain no apprehension, that genuine christianity will suffer because it is not taken under the protection of the state. If report speaks true, the churches in France are more crowded now than ever; and that the present governors of France are not atheists, is evident from the speech of Reveilliere Lepeaux, the President of the Directory, upon the anniversary of the foundation of the republic, on the 22d of September 1797, which is a continued address of thanksgiving to God for having established a republican government in France*.

Mr. W.

* The advocates for the orthodoxy of the British Cabinet will hardly object, that the prayer of the French Directory is a hypocritical farce to delude the vulgar. Yet even this would prove that the French in general are not a nation of atheists, as,

to

Mr. W. p. 391, in reply to the charge that "his system is too strict, and that, if it were generally to prevail, the business of the world could not go on," observes, amongst other things, that "if christianity, such as we have represented it, were generally to prevail, the world, from being such as it is, would become a scene of general peace and prosperity, and, abating the chances and calamities which flesh is inseparably heir to, would wear one unwearied face of complacency and joy." It is indeed probable that, if even Mr. W.'s christianity were to prevail, the world would be better and happier than it is; but that it would wear an unwearied face of complacency and joy, I can never credit, so long as any correct ideas of justice and benevolence should remain in the human mind. The stern character of Mr. W.'s God must ever be a source of anxiety and terror, which the opposite character of a second divine person could

to serve the purposes of party, they have been so assiduously and falsely represented. Reveilliere Lepeaux is a member of the Theophilanthropic Society—a religious community lately introduced into France, whose common principle is a belief in the existence, perfection, and providence of God, and in the doctrine of a future life; and whose rule of morals is, love to God, and good will to men. This sect is in a very flourishing state; its professed principles comprehend the essence of the christian religion. But, not admitting the resurrection of Christ, the Theophilanthropists deprive themselves of the only solid ground on which to build the hope of a future existence.

never

never completely relieve. But all the happy consequences which Mr. W. ascribes to *christianity*, as he represents it, would certainly follow, from the universal prevalence of the religion of Jesus, as represented in the *New Testament*.

It is with equal truth and spirit that christianity is described in the following pages, as of the highest advantage to political societies, in recommending virtuous industry, in producing a benign effect upon national character, in encouraging true patriotism, and suppressing a selfish spirit; and it is justly observed in the conclusion, p. 406, "that the christianity which can produce effects like these must be real, not nominal, deep, not superficial."

Mr. W. represents, p. 408, the "revival of *vital christianity*," which, as he explains it, is the practical belief of the articles, homilies, and liturgy of the church, as the only effectual means of strengthening the church establishment; for "the anomaly will not much longer be borne, of an establishment, the actual principles of the bulk of whose members, and even teachers, are so extremely different from those which it professes." This is indeed an alarming representation, from high authority, of the danger of the church. For, few thinking persons, besides the pious author of the *Practical View*, expect the return of such an age of darkness, as to produce a general belief of all that is contained in obsolete articles, homilies, and creeds.

I doubt

I doubt whether even his own faith, large as it is, extends quite so far. But let Mr. W. be comforted. The case may not be so desperate as he imagines. He may learn, perhaps, from the Right Reverend Bench itself, and certainly from the *orthodox* christians of Birmingham, that there are other ways of supporting an establishment, besides a real persuasion of the truth of its doctrine; and I strongly suspect, that the prelate of Rochester would smile at the honest simplicity of the member for Yorkshire, in supposing that a sincere faith in creeds and homilies is at all necessary to the permanent prosperity of a national church.

The author goes on to observe, p. 409: "The kind of religion which we have recommended, *whatever opinion may be entertained concerning its truth*, and to say nothing of the agency of divine grace, must at least be *conceded* to be the *only one* which is at all suited to make impression upon the lower orders, by strongly interesting the passions of the human mind." Who the persons may be, that are so ready to make the extraordinary *concessions* contained in the preceding paragraph, Mr. W. best knows. I do not indeed wonder that they who believe with him, that all men by nature are "tainted radically, and to the very core, with sin;" that even the elect would not have been saved, unless one God had died to satisfy the justice and appease the wrath of another; and that none of the hapless race

of

of Adam can do any thing to extricate themselves from the wretched condition in which their Creator placed them, till they are regenerated, and new created, by a third God, who is at the same time one with, and distinct from, the other two; I do not, I say, wonder, that a person who believes all this, and who sees the great effect which such stupendous mysteries produce upon the ignorant multitude, should imagine that such a religion is the only one suited to make impression upon the lower orders. But, that any person admitting the divine authority of the christian revelation, and regarding these doctrines as irrational, unscriptural, and antichristian, should make the concession here supposed, appears most unaccountable and incredible. In the Acts of the apostles we read, that at one time "three thousand" were converted;" at another "five thousand;" that "multitudes believed in the Lord, both of men and women;" and that "myriads of jews in particular professed the christian faith." But certainly a man would be much at a loss to discover these "peculiar doctrines" in the apostolical discourses recorded in that history*; and to assert that they were introduced by the apostles in their preaching, although omitted by their historian, would be a most arbitrary and unwarrantable assumption. The genuine doctrines of the gospel, which are indeed

* See Dr. Toulmin's Letters on the Practical Efficacy of the Unitarian Doctrine.

too simple and sublime to work powerfully and instantaneously upon the gross passions of the uninformed multitude, but which, when duly attended to, will strongly interest the best affections both of the learned and the unlearned, will most assuredly be found sufficiently efficacious, in the hand of Divine Providence, to accomplish their proper effect at the proper time, and they need no human additions to render them more interesting to the human passions.

I am, Madam, &c.

LETTER XVIII.

Whether popularity be a criterion of Truth. The best means of opposing Atheism and Immorality. Stability of an Established Church.

MADAM,

OUR author seems to regret, p. 409, "that the reign of prejudice, and even of honest prepossession, and of grateful veneration, by which," as he observes, "almost any system may be supported, is no more." And indeed with reason: for when established prejudice, and unreasonable prepossession, however honest, is removed, it is much to be apprehended that his "peculiar doctrines" will not long maintain

maintain their ground. Mr. W. however, is not the true-born Englishman who values his prejudices "because they are prejudices." He assigns a reason, such as it is, why we should retain the system of principles which we have received from our ancestors. "The ancients," he assures us, p. 409, "were wiser than ourselves." Hence he infers, that deference is due to their authority in religion. And, admitting the premises, the conclusion naturally follows. But where are we to learn the fact? Probability is clearly on the other side of the question. The moderns are endued with natural powers equal to those of the ancients; they are placed in circumstances far more favourable to mental improvement, and enjoy the benefit of the experience of their predecessors; it requires better evidence than mere unsupported assertion, to prove that under these circumstances the wisdom of the moderns is inferior to that of the ancients. Indeed, it is high time to lay aside the trite and unmeaning cant of the "wisdom of our ancestors." Their age was the infancy, ours approaches towards the maturity of the world. It would be equally rational for the man of ripened understanding to talk of the wisdom of his childhood.

But if we will not bow to the wisdom of our ancestors, who "kept philosophy to themselves, and left religion for the million, as alone adapted to their grosser natures," p. 410, a triumphant
appeal

appeal is made to fact, in proof of the superior excellence of this mystical system. "Let the Socinian and the moral teacher of christianity come forth, and tell us what effects *they* have produced on the lower orders. They themselves will hardly deny the inefficacy of their instructions." This is assuming a very lofty tone of address indeed: but by what right, does not clearly appear; and how far consistent with that humility which the author everywhere affects, it behoves him seriously to consider. A writer who is justly entitled to great deference assures us, that "the day is coming which will prove every man's work," and exhorts us "to judge nothing before the time." He also teaches, that "it does not become the ministers of the gospel to glory." Mr. W. well knows, that the most enlightened and zealous ministers of religion have often appeared "to labour in vain, and to spend their strength for nought." This might have taught him not to judge of the truth of a doctrine by the success of its advocates, even though the men, whom he invidiously calls the Socinian, and the moral teacher of christianity, had been, in fact, as unsuccessful as he is pleased to represent them. I am no Socinian; for my creed is as remote from that of Socinus, as it is from the "peculiar doctrines" of Mr. W. But I profess myself to be an Unitarian christian, and "a moral teacher of christianity;" and I can assure the gentleman who takes

takes upon himself to call us to account, that I am not at all inclined to admit the absolute inefficacy of our instructions. It is an indubitable fact, whether Mr. W. is aware of it or not, that there are in this country thousands who are not ashamed to avow the Unitarian doctrine, and whose lives are as honourable to their profession as if they were adepts in all the "peculiarities" of his creed. And there is reason to believe that there are thousands more, both in the church and out of it, who think with us, but who are deterred by secular considerations, and the harsh spirit of the times, from avowing their real principles; "loving the praise of men more than the "praise of God*."

Yet still it is alleged, that our success is as nothing, in comparison with that of those who teach the system of doctrines here recommended, and which is said to have "proved its correspondence "with the character originally given of christianity, "that it was calculated for the poor, by changing "the whole condition of the mass of society in many "of the most populous districts in this and other "countries." But whither does this argument tend? Are the Calvinists nearer to the truth than the Unitarians, because they are more successful in making proselytes? But the Moravians have been more successful than the Calvinists; the Jesuits, than

* John xii. 43.

the Moravians, and the Mahometans, than all. Is therefore the doctrine of Mahomet a revelation from heaven? The success of Jesus, who was also a "moral teacher of christianity" during his personal ministry, was very inconsiderable: while the pharisees, who compassed sea and land to make a proselyte, had thousands of devotees, especially among the inferior orders, who "daily thanked God" that they were not as other men are," and who would hold no communion with Jesus and his disciples, but regarded them with abhorrence and contempt, as violators of the sabbath, transgressors of the law, and friends of publicans and sinners. Can this fact be denied? But, if admitted, what is the conclusion to which the author's principles will lead him from these premises?

Mr. W. p. 411, expresses his apprehension that "the extinction of religion among us would be attended with the loss of our church establishment;" an event in his apprehension pregnant with the "most fatal consequences:" he hints, p. 412, that it would "greatly endanger our civil institutions;" and that the want of an establishment "would be in the highest degree injurious to the cause of christianity." Upon all these points I have the fortune, good or bad, to differ from our well-intentioned author. I can indeed agree with him, that the principles of the liturgy would rapidly decline when "the liturgy itself should no longer remain in
"use."

"use." But I am far from thinking that the "extinction of religion," if such a case could be supposed, would necessarily entail the ruin of the establishment. Interested priests, and crafty statesmen, will continue to support a religious establishment which answers their private and political purposes, at the same time that they hold its doctrines in contempt. The idolatry of pagan Rome subsisted in splendour long after the declaration of one of its most enlightened statesmen*, "that he wondered how augur could meet augur without laughing." And the authority of papal Rome was never more triumphant than when its sovereign pontiff†, upon the receipt of an immense treasure, unwarily exclaimed, "How lucrative is this fable of Jesus Christ!" Nor have modern statesmen been deficient in imitating the "wisdom of the ancients, in confining philosophy to themselves, and in leaving religion for the grosser capacities of the million." The persecuting administration, which, soon after the commencement of this century, disgraced the closing years of an unhappy devotee, were not suspected of being very strongly attached to the doctrines of that church, which, from interested views, they supported by every mode of oppression short of the faggot and the wheel.

There are, however, many who think that if the

* Cicero.

† Leo X.

church establishment should be dissolved, our civil constitution, if administered with wisdom and justice, would not be in the least endangered. At any rate, whatever becomes of human establishments, civil or ecclesiastical, the church of Christ is founded upon a rock, and will remain firm and unimpaired. And though liturgies and creeds may fall into disuse, the doctrine of the scriptures will continue as long as those truly "inestimable" records of the christian religion shall subsist.

French principles seem to haunt Mr. W.'s mind almost as much as they did that of Edmund Burke; and p. 419. he represents "the prevalence of evangelical christianity," by which he no doubt means his own system of "peculiar doctrines," as the best "antidote for the malignity of their venom," and the most efficacious means of "reviving the fainting cause of morals." But the only way to oppose atheism and infidelity with success, is by discarding all absurdity and mysticism from religion; by shewing that genuine christianity maintains nothing inconsistent with good sense; that the doctrines it teaches are such as approve themselves to the most enlightened understandings; that the practice it enjoins is eminently beneficial to individuals and to society; and that the hopes which it inspires are in the highest degree cheering and consolatory, and tend in the most direct and powerful manner to elevate the character and to purify the heart.

As

As a farther recommendation of this "christianity of our better days," as Mr. W. styles it, he adds, p. 420, "that the teachers of these doctrines are perhaps without exception friendly to our ecclesiastical and civil establishments; and consequently that their instructions and influence tend directly, as well as indirectly, to the maintenance of the cause of order and good government." If by this assertion be meant no more than that men paid by the state, to teach the religion of the state, are in general the zealous supporters of that government, and of that religion, which supports them, the assertion is neither new nor marvellous. It has been the practice of priests of this description, in all ages, countries, and religions. But it is no proof, nor even the slightest presumption, that the doctrine so supported is true. But if Mr. W. wishes to insinuate, that the opposers of his unscriptural doctrines are not as valuable and peaceable members of the community as those who hold them, the insinuation is unfounded and illiberal; highly unbecoming his character as a christian, however it may serve his purpose as a political partisan.

Amongst other means of reviving his "christianity of better days," Mr. W. p. 421. presses an attention to this subject on "the dignitaries of the sacred order," and expresses his approbation of some "who have already sounded the alarm, justly

“ censuring the practice of suffering christianity to
 “ degenerate to a mere system of ethics, and re-
 “ commending more attention to the peculiar doc-
 “ trines of our religion.” Here I presume that he
 alludes to Bp. Horsley, who suggested this advice to
 the clergy of the diocese of St. David’s. This vene-
 rable prelate has his “ peculiar doctrines,” too, as
 well as Mr. W. which “ whoever does not receive
 “ shall without doubt perish everlastingly !” And
 it must be highly edifying to an audience of Cam-
 brian peasants to hear “ how the Father produced
 “ the Son by contemplating his own perfections* ;”
 and being either unable, or unwilling, to produce
 any more Sons in the same way, he, together with
 the Son, (for this is the doctrine of the Romish

* “ The existence of the Son flows necessarily from the Di-
 “ vine intellect exerted in itself : from the Father’s contempla-
 “ tion of his own perfections. But as the Father ever was, his
 “ perfections have ever been, and his intellect has been ever
 “ active. But perfections which have ever been, the ever active
 “ intellect must ever have contemplated, and the contemplation
 “ which hath ever been, must ever have been accompanied with
 “ its just effect, the personal existence of the Son.” This ridi-
 culous jargon, the learned prelate says, “ seems to be founded in
 “ scripture,” and it makes one of the “ peculiar doctrines” of
 his gospel. And a very peculiar doctrine indeed it is ; sufficient
 to overthrow every pretence to divine authority in any book
 in which it is contained, and in any system in which it is in-
 cluded. See Horsley’s Tracts, p. 55.

church

church for which this truly catholic Prelate expresses a strong predilection*), produced the holy Ghost, who proceeded from them both, as the schoolmen assure us, not by generation, but by *spiration*†.

* The Nicene fathers maintained that the Holy Ghost proceeded from the Father only: but the divines of the Romish communion afterwards discovered that the Son was equally concerned with the Father, in the *procession* of the Holy Ghost; and notwithstanding the violent opposition of the Greek church, they have foisted his name into the Nicene Creed, where it maintains its place with the same confidence and justice with which the celebrated heavenly witnesses keep their station, 1 John v. 7. that is, in open defiance of all evidence and decency.

The partiality of this right reverend Prelate to the papal church appears in his circular letter to the clergy of his Welch diocese; where speaking of the Romish emigrant priests, he says, "However they may differ from us in certain points of doctrine, discipline, and external rites, they are nevertheless our brethren, members of Christ, children of God, heirs of the promises; more near and dear to us in truth than some who, affecting to be called our protestant brethren, have no other title to the name of protestant than a jew or a pagan." And because these persons "professing to receive our Lord as a teacher," hesitate to admit the bishop's "peculiar doctrines" as revealed truths, and are generally advocates for civil and religious liberty, this christian Prelate, in the true spirit of an inquisitor, denounces them as "endeavouring to propagate in this country those treasonable and atheistical notions" which he says "have done so much mischief in France." Thus, with some men, calumny supplies the place of argument.

† See Doddridge's Theological Lectures, Prop. 130, § 4:

This eminent Divine, who in consequence of his officious zeal in the cause of orthodoxy, and the truly original discoveries he has made in the science of theology, has been raised from the humble "couch of archidiaconal preferment" to "exalt his mitred front in courts and parliaments," appears to be no mean proficient in the "wisdom of the ancients, who confined philosophy to the schools of the learned, while they kept up for the million a system of religion, *such as it was*, as alone adapted to their grosser natures." Amongst other curious articles, he has discovered, in the writings of Tertullian, an eminent christian father of the second century, that the "majority of believers," in his time, were mere "idiots*." Readers, not so perspicacious as the Bishop of Rochester, have generally conceived the sense of the passage to be, that the majority of christians, of that age, being plain unlettered men, zealous for the divine Unity, warmly resisted the Trinitarian doctrine, which some philosophic christians were then endeavouring to introduce†. But Tertul-

* Horsley's Tracts, p. 175.

† Dr. Clarke thus translates this celebrated passage in Tertullian. "The *unlearned people*, which are always the greatest part of believers, are frightened at the notion of the æconomy, (i. e. the Trinity); and pretending that we teach two or three Gods, but that they are the worshippers of the one God, they perpetually cry out, We hold fast the Monarchy."—Dr. Clarke on the Trinity, p. 217.

lian, who wrote in Latin, here uses a word of Greek extraction; and the learned prelate, being "pretty much at home in the Greek language," assures us, that the word can mean neither more nor less than idiots. And no doubt, by parity of reason, the majority of believers are "idiots," to this day, in his lordship's estimation. And idiots indeed they must be, if they can implicitly admit all the jargon, and absurdity, which he and others have held forth as "peculiar doctrines" of divine revelation. Thanks be to God, the age of "darkness is passing away, and the true light now shineth*."

I am, Madam, &c.

LETTER XIX.

Observations on Mr. W.'s Practical Hints to various descriptions of persons.

MADAM,

IN the seventh chapter, to which we now proceed, "practical hints are suggested to various descriptions of persons," and the section with which it opens contains many valuable remarks which do great credit to the piety and benevolence of the au-

* 1 John, ii. 8.

thor, but which are also blended with some observations liable to just animadversion.

Mr. W. begins, in p. 423, with telling the "bulk" of professed christians, that the difference between "them and true believers is of the most serious and momentous account, and that their christianity is no christianity." Now, if this charge means no more than that nominal christians are not real christians, the observation is true, but too obvious to be introduced with so much parade. But if it be meant that no christianity is genuine which does not include what he calls "the peculiar doctrines," we beg leave, for reasons already largely stated, to demur to his authority.

The duty of self-inquiry, which is strongly urged p. 424, is doubtless of sufficient importance to deserve all our attention, and we are with great propriety warned against "our natural proneness to think too favourably of ourselves." But there is no occasion to have recourse to the unscriptural and unphilosophical notion of the "corruption of human nature," to account for the disposition which generally prevails "to over-rate our good qualities, and to overlook or extenuate our defects." A little acquaintance with the theory of human nature will sufficiently account for the existence of selfishness, without supposing it to be innate, or derived by inheritance from our fallen ancestor.

What

What is advanced, p. 426, upon "the sources of
"the erroneous estimates we form of our religious
"and moral character," and particularly concerning
the danger of mistaking "outgrowing, or merely
"changing, our vices for forsaking of all sin," is in
general highly proper, and deserving of serious at-
tention, as are also the remarks, p. 432, upon the
subject of "uncharitableness and true charity;"
and I agree entirely in the observation, that it is
"no true charity to countenance men in their vices."

Mr. W. justly remonstrates, p. 436, against ap-
plying the epithets "innocent and good-hearted"
to thoughtless and dissipated young persons of either
sex. But his arguments would have been equally
forcible, if he had not loaded them with the unscrip-
tural doctrines of original sin*, and the supernatural
"operations of divine grace." If, however, any
persons are "decent, sober, useful, respectable mem-
"bers of the community, and amiable in the rela-
"tions of domestic life," p. 408, it does not become

* Mr. W. exhorts such persons "to remember that they
"are fallen creatures, *born in sin*." The only passage in the
New Testament where this phrase occurs, is John ix. 34, where
the pharisees charge the man who was born blind with being
"altogether born in sins," in direct contradiction to our Lord's
own declaration, ver. 3, in reply to a question upon the case,
proposed by his disciples, "Neither did this man sin, nor his
"parents." It is plain, therefore, that a pharisaic tradition is
here inculcated by our author as an evangelical truth, and that
in opposition to the authority of Christ.

us to pronounce, that they are not true christians. As to the phrases, "born again," "putting off the "old man," and the like, they refer wholly, as we have often observed, to the conversion of bigoted jews, or of idolatrous heathen, to the faith of Christ, and are never used to describe any moral process in the minds of those who have been educated in christian principles. It must however be conceded, that mere decency of behaviour without piety, benevolence, and self-government, is not sufficient to constitute genuine christianity.

The advice, p. 441, to those who wish to become true christians, contains much that is valuable; but, I am sorry to say, still more that is injudicious, exceptionable, and unscriptural. Let such persons meditate, let them pray, let them examine themselves, let them resolve, let them watch, let them cease to do evil, and learn to do right; let them dedicate all their faculties and powers to the service of God. All this is well. But, why must they ascribe their reformation to supernatural "workings of the divine "spirit?" What is the meaning of praying to God "for Christ's sake, and in reliance on his mediation?" and where is the warrant for so doing? Where do the scriptures teach them to "labour to "become deeply impressed with a sense of their own "radical blindness and corruption?" and that, above all, they are "to contemplate that stupendous truth, "the incarnation and crucifixion of the son of God?

" or

“or to estimate the guilt of sin by the costly satisfaction which was required to atone for it?” All these imaginary considerations, which have no foundation in reason, or in scripture, tend to bewilder the understanding, to check the progress of rational and manly piety and virtue, and to introduce a system of fantastic feelings, which have no foundation in the truth of facts, and which contribute nothing to virtuous practice.

Very wise and proper, in my opinion, are the repeated cautions suggested, p. 444, not to over-rate “human estimation.” But to a person who habitually regards himself as acting under the eye of God, the additional motive, of an imaginary “assembly of invisible spectators,” is totally unnecessary. It is like bringing in human creeds to improve the gospel doctrine; human establishments, to support the church of Christ; and the satisfaction of a mediator, to appease the anger of an infinitely merciful God.

As Mr. W. never defines humility, it is difficult to know in what sense he uses the word. If it means a just view of a man's own imperfections, it cannot appear to any person “a paradox, that in proportion as the christian grows in grace, he grows also in humility,” p. 446. For this is no more than saying, that in proportion as men advance in virtue, they advance in self-knowledge, and become more sensible of their frailties and imperfections.

tions. But I cannot help suspecting, that the humility upon which some persons value themselves, is nothing more than a persuasion that, in common with the rest of mankind, they are "by nature radically tainted with sin," while at the same time they presume, that themselves, with a few others, have been arbitrarily selected from the general mass, to be regenerated and saved. But if this be their humility, it is, I fear, too nearly akin to pride, and naturally tends to generate a high conceit of themselves in those who are, or who imagine themselves to be, the chosen favourites of heaven.

The bulk of nominal christians are said, p. 449, to "know nothing of christianity but as a system of restraints," and their notion of christian practice is stigmatized, "as servile, base, and mercenary." But, as virtuous habits are to be attained, not by supernatural influence, but by a slow and gradual, and sometimes a difficult and painful process, I cannot think so hardly of those who, from a sense of duty, deny themselves unlawful gratifications to which they are inclined, though they fall short of those exalted characters whose established habits of virtue render them superior to temptation. In one I see the commencement, in the other the maturity, of a virtuous course; and the first dawnings of reformation are not to be despised because they do not, at once, burst forth into the splendour, or attain the steadiness, of the perfect day.

I wonder not at the pains which Mr. W. takes,

p. 452, to repel "an objection common," as he says, "in the mouths of nominal christians, that his religion wears a gloomy and forbidding aspect." And all that he so eloquently urges in defence of his own system of christianity, is certainly true of the genuine religion of the gospel. Happiness is the ultimate end of all the requisitions and the restraints of virtue, nor is any gratification prohibited, but what is inconsistent with a superior and more permanent good. And I doubt not that many well meaning persons, even upon Mr. W.'s principles, have enjoyed much conscious satisfaction and delight. But, whatever may be said to the contrary, it is not possible that such a system should not be occasionally productive of many very painful sensations in a benevolent and reflecting mind, because it represents the God and Father of the universe as a Tyrant. And though the introduction of a second God, whose attribute is perfect benevolence, may relieve the imagination, and, as appears in the work before us, and in others of the same stamp, may chiefly occupy the thoughts and affections of christians of this persuasion, and may even set a believer at rest with respect to his own personal safety; yet this second Being does not operate as so complete a negative upon the character of the first, but that a serious and benevolent mind will, at times, be greatly shocked to think of the mass of mankind as doomed to eternal misery, because of that natural depravity

depravity which they could not help, and which He who made them, gave, and would not heal; and the contemplation of such a Being must often fill the mind with anxious misgivings, and with secret terrors. These however are alleviated in some degree, by entertaining good hopes concerning their own state, by thinking as little as possible upon God, and by dwelling continually, as it is known that persons who hold these principles do, upon the *excellencies and graces* of that imaginary second person, who saves them from the "*fury*" of the first.

This, in the language of Mr. W. p. 458, is placing a "firm confidence in the unceasing care and kindness of a gracious Saviour;" and, p. 459, relying upon "the assured mercy of the Redeemer." But it is, in truth, as I have before observed, a species of christian idolatry, from which the christian law requires that we should, with the utmost caution, abstain.

I am,

Madam, &c.

LETTER

L E T T E R XX.

Mr. Wilberforce's Advice to Believers and to Sceptics.

MADAM,

MR. Wilberforce has classed in the same section his Advice to Sceptics and to Unitarians. I will take the liberty to correct his distribution; and in this letter I will take into consideration the advice he addresses "to some who profess their full assent to "the fundamental doctrines of the gospel," (that is, whose opinions coincide with his own,) and that which he addresses to "sceptics,"—or, in plain language, to those who believe too much, and to those who believe too little.

His advice to believers is contained in his second section, p. 461; and he "warns these men, first, "p. 464, to beware lest they be nominal christians "of another sort." It is not easy to understand this distinction between different sorts of nominal christians. I am unwilling to believe, what nevertheless the author's language seems to imply, that, in Mr. W.'s opinion, the first and most fundamental error is a misapprehension of christian doctrine, and that the next and more venial one is a defect in christian practice. His words are these, p. 461: "In a former chapter we largely insisted on what "may be termed the fundamental practical error of
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“the bulk of professed christians in our days; their
 “either overlooking, or *misconceiving*, the peculiar
 “method which the gospel has provided for the
 “renovation of our corrupted nature, and for the
 “attainment of every christian grace.” Here then
 we find that “*misconception* of the gospel method”
 is represented as the fundamental error of modern
 nominal christians.

He adds, that “while we attend in the *first* place
 “to this, we must at the same time guard against a
 “practical mistake of *another* kind. There are not a
 “few who satisfy themselves with what may be
 “termed general christianity; who feel general
 “penitence and humiliation, but who neglect that
 “vigilant and jealous care with which they should la-
 “bour to extirpate every particular corruption,” &c.

I do not then misrepresent our author, when I
 state him as teaching that misconception of christian
 doctrine is the “fundamental practical error” of
 the present day; and I have mistaken the whole
 tenor of his book, if he does not mean to represent
 this fundamental error as inconsistent with the sal-
 vation of those who hold it. It is indeed difficult to
 believe, that, in this enlightened and inquisitive age,
 a man of Mr. W.’s rank, talents, and character can
 doom to destruction all those wise and good men
 who have doubted, or rejected, his strange unscrip-
 tural doctrines. If this be the religion the pleasures
 of which he enjoys with so high a relish, I, for one,
 do

do not "envy him his feelings." As to the rest, what he advances in this section, allowance being made for his assumed principles, is very just. The christian religion requires the absolute renunciation of every vice, and the practice of every virtue. It is the indispensable duty of all to exercise the greatest vigilance, and to set a special guard against those vices to which, in their respective circumstances, they are peculiarly exposed.

Mr. W. now proceeds to "address some brief observations to sceptics," p. 467; and what he advances upon this head appears to me, in the main, just, and deserving of very serious attention. It is a fair question which Mr. W. proposes to unbelievers, "whether, if christianity be not in their estimation true, there is not at least a presumption in its favour, sufficient to entitle it to a serious examination, from its having been embraced, upon full inquiry, by Bacon and Milton, and Locke and Newton." And again, p. 468, "Can the sceptic in general say with truth, that he has either prosecuted an examination into the evidences of revelation at all, or at least with a seriousness and diligence in any degree proportioned to the importance of the subject?"

I will beg leave, by the way, to observe, that neither Locke nor Newton, who are here so deservedly celebrated for their rational and firm attachment to the christian religion, were believers in,
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what are styled throughout the *Practical View*, "the peculiar doctrines of the gospel." There is great reason to believe that Sir Isaac Newton was a proper Unitarian*, as it is certain that his friend Hopton Haynes also was. As to Mr. Locke, he was the father of rational criticism. It is he who, by introducing the wise and happy method of making the scriptures their own interpreters, has taught us the true meaning of those figurative expressions, upon which the men who only derive their knowledge of christianity from catechisms and creeds build their crude and unscriptural systems. Mr. Locke was a man of extraordinary genius and talents, great in the departments of metaphysical, moral, and political philosophy, but greatest of all in the interpretation of the scriptures, to which he devoted the latter part of his life. I will venture to say, that no person will ever understand the epistolary parts of the New Testament, who does not read them in the method which Mr. Locke recommends in the introduction to his own excellent commentary on the epistles. But this requires a degree of attention and mental exertion, which few are able,

* Mr. Haynes assured a friend, "that Sir Isaac Newton did not believe our Lord's pre-existence; and that he much lamented Dr. Clarke's embracing Arianism; which opinion he feared had been, and still would be, if maintained by learned men, a great obstruction to the progress of christianity."—— Haynes on the Attributes of God, preface, p. 21.

and fewer still are willing, to apply. It is much easier to quote texts as apophthegms, in the sense imposed upon them by creeds and homilies, than to reflect, compare, and investigate for ourselves. Mr. W. professes, and no doubt sincerely, to value the scriptures highly; and I am persuaded that, if he would testify his regard by studying them in Mr. Locke's method, he might, even yet, be gradually introduced into their true sense and meaning. But with him it would be a work of time, labour, and self-denial; for the cloud of prejudice which hangs over his mind would with great difficulty be dispelled. I do not mean to say that all Mr. Locke's interpretations are just; but he has supplied us with the true key to scripture criticism, which those who succeed him, assisted by his previous labours, may use to more advantage than he himself has done. Of this we have a remarkable instance in Dr. Taylor's judicious commentary on the epistle to the Romans, and the admirable Key which he has prefixed to it; in which he explains, and amply confirms, the principles of interpretation before advanced by Mr. Locke. And the successors of Dr. Taylor, treading in the same steps, and taking advantage of his improvements, may advance still farther in the same road. In comparison with such truly profound and instructive works, how superficial and trifling are some popular expositions, in which, through the force of prejudice, ignorance of
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the just principles of scripture criticism, or a desire to please the multitude, the text is every where strained to the popular sense, and the apostles are made to write as though they had been disciples of the Westminster Assembly of Divines!

Infidelity is represented, p. 468, "as the production of a careless and irreligious life, operating together with prejudices and erroneous conceptions concerning the nature of the leading doctrines and fundamental tenets of christianity." And its progress is pretty accurately traced in "the case of young men of condition, bred up among nominal christians." Mr.W. p. 473, denies, "that the increase of infidelity in our own days, is in consequence of the reasonings of the infidel writers having been much studied, but from the progress of luxury, and the decay of morals; and so far as this increase may be traced at all to the works of sceptical writers, it has been produced not by argument and discussion, but by sarcasms, and points of wit, which have operated on weak minds." And he asserts, with a confidence not sufficiently founded on fact, that "the literary opposers of christianity, from Herbert to Hume, have been seldom read." He adds, "Their very names would be scarcely found, if Leland had not preserved them from oblivion." I suspect that the worthy author is in this instance under a mistake, and that the subtle and plausible objections of Bo-

lingbroke

lingbroke and Hume are more read, even at present, than the sensible and solid, but dull and verbose, replies of Leland.

I shall conclude this letter with stating, briefly, what appear to me some of the principal causes of modern infidelity. 1. The first and chief is an unwillingness to submit to the restraints of religion, and the dread of a future life, which leads men to overlook evidence, and to magnify objections. 2. The palpable absurdities of creeds generally professed by christians, which men of sense having confounded with the genuine doctrines of revelation, they have rejected the whole at once, and without inquiry. 3. Impatience, and unwillingness to persevere in the laborious task of weighing arguments and examining objections. 4. Fashion has biased the minds of some young persons of virtuous characters, and competent knowledge, to reject revelation, in order to avoid the imputation of singularity, and to escape the ridicule of those with whom they desire to associate. 5. Pride, that they might at an easy rate attain the character of philosophers, and of superiority to vulgar prejudice. 6. Dwelling upon difficulties only, from which the most rational system is not exempt, and by which the most candid, inquisitive, and virtuous minds are sometimes entangled.

The mass of mankind, who never think at all, but who admit without hesitation "all that the
" nurse

"nurse and that the priest have taught," can never become sceptics. Of course, the whole class of unbelievers consists of persons who have thought, more or less, upon the subject; and as persons of sense seldom discard at once all the principles in which they have been educated, it is not wonderful that many who begin with the highest orthodoxy pass through different stages of their creed, dropping an article or two in every step of their progress, till at length, weary of their labour, and not knowing where to fix, they reject it altogether. This, to a superficial and timid observer, appears to be an objection to freedom of inquiry; for no person beginning to inquire can or ought to say where he will stop. But the sincere friend to truth will not be discouraged: for without inquiry truth cannot be ascertained; and if the christian religion shrinks from close examination in this bold and inquisitive age, it must and it ought to fall. But of this issue I have not the smallest apprehension. Genuine christianity can well bear the fiery trial through which it is now passing; and while the dross and the rubbish are consumed, the pure gold will remain uninjured, and will come forth from the furnace with increased lustre.

I am,

Madam, &c.

LETTER

LETTER XXI.

Animadversions upon Mr. Wilberforce's account of the Unitarians.—Conclusion.

MADAM,

THE prospect of rest after the toil of a journey is not more pleasant to the weary traveller, than to me, and probably to my readers, is the near approach of the conclusion of my task. I request indulgence therefore but for one epistle more; and then, "having completed my strain, I will return to obscurity*."

Mr. W. proceeds, p. 476, to animadvert upon the Unitarians; and first, he apologizes to his orthodox reader, p. 475, for "conceding the term to the class of persons" who maintain the proper humanity of Christ. Mere words are never worth a dispute; and if the worshippers of three, or of three hundred, equal, infinite spirits choose to call themselves Unitarians, they have my free consent, provided they allow me to use the word in what appears to me to be its proper sense, and to apply it to that description of persons to whom alone, in my judgment, it belongs. A Unitarian, according to the idea which I annex to the term, is one who does not ascribe to a derived Being any attributes, works, or honours, which reason and re-

* Explebo numerum, reddarque tenebris.

velation appropriate to God. He therefore is not a Unitarian, in the proper sense of the word, who either receives Jesus as truly God; or who, in words denying his divinity, regards him as the delegate of the Father in the formation and administration of the world; or, lastly, who offers any kind of religious addresses to him. The doctrine of the Divine Unity is indeed so clearly revealed both in the Jewish and the Christian scriptures, that all Christians profess to believe it in some sense, though the majority hold principles totally repugnant to it.

Mr. W. in the plenitude of his Christian charity, observes, p. 474, "that the account which has been given of the secret but grand source of infidelity, may perhaps justly be extended, as being not seldom true in the case of those who deny the fundamental doctrines of the gospel," in other words, his own peculiar opinions. Now, the account given of the source of infidelity, p. 472, is this: "It appears plainly that infidelity is generally the offspring of prejudice, and that its success is mainly to be ascribed to the depravity of the moral character." Such, it seems, in Mr. W.'s estimation, is the true account of the general success of that doctrine, which was embraced by Newton, Lardner, and Jebb, and by many others, of the most splendid talents and unspotted characters, who have devoted their time to the study of the scriptures, and who are greatly his superiors in every branch of sacred literature.

literature. "This success is mainly to be ascribed to the depravity of the moral character." Surely, this gentleman will, upon reflection, for his own credit, retract his harsh and unjust censure, which breathes a spirit so inconsistent with that humility and candour which he every where professes. What right can Mr. W. have to invade the province of the Omniscient Judge, and to arraign his fellow-servants, and fellow-christians, of "moral depravity," because they strictly adhere to, what they believe to be, the genuine doctrine of their common Master, and resolutely reject all opinions which in their judgment are unauthorized, and untrue, by whatever epithets they may be dignified, or by whomsoever they may be embraced, defended, or imposed?

In the same spirit of charity, Unitarianism is represented, p. 475, "as a sort of half-way house between orthodoxy and infidelity." And truly, whatever might be the intention of our zealous author, I, for one, am far from being offended with the quarters he has assigned us; regarding them as a proper medium between ineligible extremes. Nor am I ashamed even to avow, that, of the two, I would rather approach the confines of cold and cheerless scepticism, than the burning zone of merciless orthodoxy. For, upon the principles of infidelity, at the very worst, all events take place at random, and my chance is as good as that of another man. But if Mr. W.'s system be true, the universe is under the

government of OMNIPOTENT MALIGNITY; than which no consideration can be more painful and alarming.

At this half-way house we are told that a person travelling "from orthodoxy to infidelity sometimes indeed finally stops; but not unfrequently he only pauses there for a while, and then pursues his progress." Now, having myself been a resident in it for some years, I may be supposed to know a little more about it than Mr. W. And I can from experience assure that gentleman, that it is a very safe, pleasant, and commodious dwelling, in which if he would venture to take up his abode, he would not be displeased either with his entertainment or his company. To enjoy the situation however to the greatest advantage, he must cease to look at objects through the false medium of a fervid imagination, and must view them in the sober light of reason and truth. "When he becomes a man, he must put away childish things." He will indeed lose some of his present visionary raptures; but the want of these will be abundantly compensated by the enlargement and simplicity of his views, by the increased strength and comprehension of his mind, and by the proper direction of his religious affections.

Our author is mistaken if he means to represent the majority of those who enter this mansion as only sojourners, "pausing for a while, and then pursuing their progress to infidelity." Some, it must be confessed,

confessed, of whom we once entertained better hopes, have deserted our society. We formed, alas, an erroneous judgment of their characters. "They went out from us because they were not of us; if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us*." They either did not understand their principles; or they were perplexed with difficulties which perhaps patience and attention might have solved: or they did not sufficiently feel the practical energy of christian truth; or they might possibly be too much influenced by love of the world, to advancement in which, the profession of unpopular truth is no small obstruction. But it is not our province to judge. They have a Master to whom they are accountable; and by his decision they must abide. May that sentence be favourable!—In the mean time, Mr. W. may be assured, that the number who have left us are few in comparison with those who remain, or who are daily joining themselves to our society. And though the believers in certain "peculiar doctrines" may think us extravagant in our expectations, I can assure them that we do not despair of the advent of a glorious period, in the revolution of ages, when the Unitarian Church shall comprehend in its ample inclosure the whole christianized world.

Mr. W. does the Unitarians the justice to acknowledge, p. 475, "that their teachers by no means

* 1 John xi. 19.

“ profess to absolve their followers from the unbending strictness of christian morality. They prescribe the predominant love of God, and an habitual spirit of devotion.” Lest however they should be exalted above measure by this liberal concession, he adds, “ But it is an unquestionable fact, a fact which they themselves *almost* admit, that this class of religionists,” as he is pleased to style them, “ is not in general distinguished for superior purity of life ; and still less for that frame of mind, which, by the injunction to be spiritually, not carnally minded, the word of God prescribes to us, as one of the surest tests of our experiencing the vital power of christianity.”

Such is the very candid judgment which Mr. W. forms of the moral and religious character of the Unitarians. How nearly resembling the temper of the Pharisee in the parable: “ God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, nor even as this publican.” How closely bordering upon that supercilious spirit which our Lord reproves in the jews, who concluded, because “ the Son of Man came eating and drinking,” and affecting no habits of austerity or unnecessary singularity, that he must therefore “ be the friend, and associate, of publicans and sinners !” But, be it known to Mr. W. and to all who, like him, are disposed to condemn their brethren unheard, that if the Unitarians were inclined to boast in the characters of those who have professed

fessed their principles, "they have whereof to glory;" and that they could bring forward names of allowed and transcendent excellence, to whose distinguished merits their enemies themselves have been compelled to bear their unwilling testimony. And if they took pleasure in exposing the faults of their more orthodox brethren, they likewise have tales to unfold, which would reflect little credit either on the parties or on their principles. But of such mutual reproaches there would be no end, nor can any advantage accrue from them to any cause. And I hope, that the only reply which christians who think with me will ever vouchsafe to charges of this kind, is by the silent eloquence and powerful argument of a virtuous and useful life.

In the same spirit of charity, the author proceeds to remark, p. 476, that "in point of fact, Unitarianism seems to be resorted to, not merely by those who are disgusted with the "*peculiar doctrines*" of christianity (that is, Mr. W.'s opinions), but by those also who are seeking a refuge from the strictness of her practical precepts; and who more particularly would escape from the obligation which she imposes on her adherents, rather to incur the dreaded charge of singularity, than fall in with the declining manners of a dissipated age." Upon this assertion I shall only observe, that for a person to profess the obnoxious principles of Unitarianism in order to avoid the imputation of singularity,

riety, is something like a man's casting himself into the sea to escape drowning. It would be an act of pure insanity*.

Mr. W. p. 476, attempts to account for the admission of "Unitarianism, where it may be supposed to proceed from the understanding, rather than from the heart," but wisely declines "entering into a controversy," upon which he decides so peremptorily, and of which he knows so little. Since however he has thought proper to assign principles and motives to the Unitarians, so widely different from the real grounds of their faith and practice, I will take the liberty in a few words to set him right.

The Unitarians believe, upon grounds common to all christians, that Jesus of Nazareth was a divinely commissioned teacher of truth and righteousness; and that, having been publicly crucified by his enemies, he was raised from the dead on the third day. They regard it as an indispensable duty to believe whatever he was commissioned to teach. And particularly, upon the evidence of his doctrine and resurrection, they expect a general resurrection of the dead, "both of the just and of the unjust;" and a subsequent state of retribution, in which all shall be treated in exact correspondence with their moral characters.

* Numerous and increasing as the Unitarians certainly are, their number is still very small in proportion to that of the advocates for the popular system, and the obloquy to which they are exposed is notorious.

That

That Unitarians believe Jesus to have been a man, for the same reasons for which they believe the proper humanity of Peter and Paul, of Moses and Abraham. He appeared as a man, he called himself a man, he was believed by all his companions and contemporaries to be a man, he had all the accidents of a man; he was born, he lived, he ate and drank, and slept; he conversed, he rejoiced, he wept, he suffered, and he died as other men.

That he was nothing more than a man, possessed of extraordinary powers and invested with an extraordinary divine commission, and that he had no existence previous to his birth, they believe, simply upon this ground, that there is no evidence to prove the contrary. It is not incumbent upon them, nor do they pretend, to produce proof, that a person who appeared as a man was really such. If any maintain that Jesus of Nazareth was something more than a human being, whether an angelic, superangelic, or divine person, it is their business to prove their assertion.

Evidence, such as it is, has been produced; and it consists of certain texts of scripture, chiefly taken from the New Testament, which are thought to teach, or to imply, the doctrine*. Now, the Unitarians

* A person who has not paid particular attention to the subject, would be surprised to find how very few texts there are which even *seem* directly to assert the pre-existence of Christ. If
any

rians pledge themselves to shew that all these passages are either interpolated, corrupted, or misunderstood. This they do by critical inquiries, either into the authenticity of the text, or into its proper meaning in the connexion in which it stands*. Unitarians therefore are universally friends to a careful, diligent, and critical study of the scriptures.

Here the argument rests. No satisfactory evidence having been produced of the pre-existence and deity of Jesus of Nazareth, the doctrine of course falls to the ground; and with it all those anti-christian opinions which are blended with it, or

any one is desirous to learn the true doctrine of the New Testament upon this subject, let him collect the texts that are thought directly or indirectly to support it, and likewise those in which the titles, attributes, works, and honours of Deity are thought to be ascribed to Christ; and, comparing the explanations given of these texts by the writers for and against the pre-existence and deity of Christ, a serious and unprejudiced inquirer will soon discover on which side the weight of argument lies. This is the true way of ascertaining the point in question. But it requires time, labour, patience, and candour. It is a much shorter and easier course, to say at once of a doctrine, "that it is the offspring of prejudice, and that its success is mainly to be ascribed to the depravity of the moral character."

* See the Commentary of Grotius, Dr. Lardner's letter on the Logos, Mr. Lindsey's Apology for resigning the Vicarage of Catterick, and the Sequel to that Apology; also, Hopton Haynes on the Attributes of God. For the doctrine of the primitive Church concerning the person of Christ, see Dr. Priestley's History of Early Opinions.

flow

flow from it. To maintain, that a more splendid and costly scheme of redemption would have been more efficacious, and more worthy of God, is highly indecent. It is arraigning infinite Wisdom at the tribunal of human Folly. The fact is, that God has actually "sent the man Christ Jesus to save us from "our iniquities:" and we are sure that this method of salvation is the best, because God hath chosen it.

This short abstract of Unitarian principles will enable us to judge of the value of an argument proposed in a work entitled Calvinism and Socinianism Compared, upon which Mr. W. p. 476, passes a very high encomium; and the amount of which is, "We Calvinists being much better christians than "you Socinians, our doctrine must of course be "true."

To this "masterly defence of the doctrines of "christianity, and acute refutation of the opposite "errors," Mr. W. and his friends are highly welcome. The Unitarians will not trespass upon the holy ground. We have learned, that "not he who "commendeth himself is approved, but whom the "Lord commendeth*:" and, satisfied with this, we wait with cheerful confidence the decision of that day "which shall try every man's work." In the mean time we rest our cause upon the scriptures critically examined, and judiciously explained. This

* 2 Cor. x. 18.

way of reasoning is branded, in the same "masterly performance*," as "mangling and altering the translation to our own minds:" which brings to my recollection the honest quaker's exclamation, "O argument! O argument! the Lord rebuke thee." From the rash censures of petulant ignorance, we appeal to the deliberate judgment of men of enlightened minds and sound learning; who testify their regard to the scriptures, not by empty professions, nor by blind submission to vulgar interpretations, but by making them the subject of candid, serious, and impartial investigation; and in such a court we expect with confidence a favourable verdict.

I have now, Madam, finished the strictures, which at your request I drew up, on "Mr. W.'s Practical View of the prevailing religious System of professed Christians;" and which, though originally intended for your private use, I have consented, with your permission, and at the desire of some candid and judicious friends, to submit to the public eye. My intention in writing has not been to depreciate Mr. W.'s character; for I think well both of his understanding and of his heart; and the goodness of his intentions in the publication before us cannot be too highly applauded. Least of all has it been my wish to disparage genuine and practical christianity. My design has been, to shew that the worthy writer is totally mistaken in the means by

* Calvinism and Socinianism Compared, p. 252.

which

which he would accomplish his benevolent purpose of making men wiser and better; and that the opinions which he represents as the "grand peculiarities" of christianity are erroneous in the extreme, and destitute of all support from the scriptures; that they calumniate human nature, and derogate exceedingly both from the moral character and from the absolute supremacy of God; that they magnify positive rites to a degree which must necessarily diminish the attention to moral duties; also, that they tend to contract the mind, and to fill it with visionary speculations, with gloomy apprehensions, and too often with malignant passions, the reverse of the liberal and cheerful spirit of genuine christianity. Upon these subjects I hope that I have expressed myself in a manner becoming a candid and serious advocate for truth, without bitterness or undue warmth. I trust also, that what has been advanced cannot easily be *misunderstood*; though I do not flatter myself that it will not be *misrepresented*. How far I may have succeeded in my professed design, must be left to your superior discernment, and to the judgment of an impartial Public.

I have the honour to be, Madam,

Your most obedient servant,

THOMAS BELSHAM.

Hackney,
Feb. 14, 1798.



THOMAS HESLIAM